



A Jester with Chameleon Faces: Laughter and Comedy in North Korea, 1953-1969

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A Jester with Chameleon Faces:
Laughter and Comedy in North Korea, 1953-1969

A dissertation presented
by
Dmitry Mironenko
to
The Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
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A Jester with Chameleon Faces:
Laughter and Comedy in North Korea, 1953-1969

Abstract

This dissertation is a study of ordinary North Korean people who have persevered in the face of tremendous social, political, and economic trials throughout their country's modern history and a tribute to their unflagging ingenuity and good humor that allowed them to hold onto their humanity. Focusing on the question of agency within the realm of everyday living, my inquiry examines the emergence of a laughing subject during the post-Korean War period and the state's efforts to discipline him through cinema in the succeeding decade. A product of the new Soviet-sponsored cultural policy of the 1950s that promoted social and political satire across the socialist world, the jester became an identity tactically adopted by various individuals, which was responsible for the proliferation of nonconformist practices in North Korea. Using Michel de Certeau's concept of the everyday as a sphere of creative inventiveness, this work describes and analyzes the small acts of "comic disobedience" by means of which the ordinary person has been able to outmaneuver the existing order and create a thriving underground culture of antidisциплиne. Spanning a variety of media from print cartoons to live-action cinema to animation, the official response to the jester's challenge, on one hand, sought to create identifiable comic characters and, on the other, effectively demarcate between humor and

satire with a view of turning a jarring cacophony of laughing voices into a harmonious chorus of collective mirth serving the state's needs. Based on Bakhtin's notion of *heteroglossia*, my method of analysis suggests that, despite the government's attempts to eliminate any ambiguity from newly constructed ideological texts, the ordinary individual always finds myriad ways to exercise autonomy through his unending playful subversion of official discourse. By tracing the evolution of this dynamic in the North Korean streets, movie theaters, and film studios over the course of nearly two decades, I argue that the production of formal film comedy was inextricably bound up with the state's desire to interpellate a politically loyal and socially conformist subject and should be seen as part of the larger everyday aesthetic of living that took root within the socialist world.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Dedication 1	xi
Dedication 2	xii
List of Illustrations	xiii
Epigraphs	xv
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Beyond Harlequins and Pierrots	1
1.2 The Jester in North Korean History	10
1.3 Review of Existing Scholarship	13
1.4 Methodology	18
1.5 Sources	21
1.6 Chapter Summaries	23
2. Jesters on the Streets	31
2.1 Introduction	31
2.2 Satire in the Premodern and Early Modern Periods	33
2.3 The Rise of the Playful Consumer	37
2.4 The Second Congress of Soviet Writers and Its Reverberations in North Korea	40
2.5 The Revival of Kim Sakkat's and Pak Yŏn-am's Legacy	47
2.6. Consumption of Foreign Literature in North Korea	53
2.7 The Issue of Appeal	56
2.8 Visual Satire in Hwa(l)sal	59
2.9 Satirical Production for Pyŏkpo	62
2.10 The Street as the Playground	64
3. The Struggle for Attractions: The Cinema of Fits and Starts and the Chameleon Spectator	72
3.1 Introduction	72
3.2 "Office Flicks" and the Captive Audience	74
3.3 The Postwar Movie Theater as the New "Street"	82
3.4 The Cinema of Fits and Starts	88
3.5 The Voices of Laughter	94
3.6 The Clown in the Machine	101
3.7 Homegrown Tinkerers	107
3.8 Conclusion	114
4. A Tale of Two Laughters: Yun Chae-yŏng and His Forgotten Comedy	122
4.1 Introduction	122
4.2 Yun Chae-yŏng and the Rise of Auteur Theory	124
4.3 Newcomers to Comedy	131
4.4 The Anti-Soviet Turn	134

4.5 Laughing at the Wrong Guy	137
4.6 Conclusion	148
5. From Marilyn Monroe to Kim Jong Il: The Making of Socialist Cinephilia.....	151
5.1 Introduction.....	151
5.2 The Beginnings of North Korean Cinephilia	155
5.3 Pleasures of the Body.....	159
5.4 A New Theory of Laughter.....	163
5.5 Playing the Heartstrings.....	167
5.6 Merry Ring.....	176
5.7 Conclusion	188
6. Wrestling with the Grotesque	192
6.1 Introduction.....	192
6.2 Understanding the “Child-Heart”	197
6.3 The Uncanny in Early Children’s Films	201
6.4 Managing Onscreen Mischief.....	206
6.5 Misfit Toys and the Animated Grotesque.....	211
6.6 Fantasy as the New Normal	223
6.7 Conclusion	230
7. Conclusions.....	235
7.1 On Angles, the Devil, and the Laughing Subject.....	235
7.2 Laughter’s Agencies	238
7.3 Toward Comic Disobedience.....	244
Appendix: Film Index (1949-1966)	251
Bibliography	259

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To my parents, grandparents, and Nadav

In memory of Valentina Nikolaevna Dmitrieva

List of Illustrations

Figure 1.1. Hyon Sun and her parents watch mass games on TV	1
Figure 1.2. Hyon Sun tries to identify her mother on TV	2
Figure 1.3. Candid faces of North Korea (1)	7
Figure 1.4. Candid faces of North Korea (2)	7
Figure 1.5. Finding the everyday	14
Figure 2.1. <i>Gulliver's Travels</i> (Pyongyang, 1957)	42
Figure 2.2. Mayakovsky's poetry in <i>Hwa(l)sal</i>	48
Figure 2.3. <i>Satirical Poet Kim Sakkat</i> (Pyongyang, 1956)	51
Figure 2.4. Guidelines on cartoon design in <i>Hwa(l)sal</i>	64
Figure 2.5. "Public chaos" at a North Korean bus stop	66
Figure 2.6. A typical North Korean street in the 1950s	69
Figure 2.7. Imagining urban harmony	70
Figure 2.8. Plans for a new leisure infrastructure for Pyongyang	71
Figure 3.1. Jesters at the movies	83
Figure 3.2. Students at the Pyongyang School of Film Managers	91
Figure 3.3. Out-of-sync voiceover narrators	106
Figure 3.4. Daytime film projection in Pyongyang	112
Figure 3.5. Everyone goes to Taedongmun Cinema	118
Figure 3.6. A South Korean movie theater	120
Figure 4.1. Yŏng-sik's father on the farm	138
Figure 4.2. The department store	138
Figure 4.3. Sun-hŭi at work	139
Figure 4.4. A doll set of Ch'unhyang and Idoryŏng	139
Figure 4.5. Baby dreams	141
Figure 4.6. Yŏng-sik and Sun-hŭi on a stroll	141
Figure 4.7. Yŏng-sik and Sun-hŭi on their way to get married	141
Figure 4.8. Dangerous streets	142
Figure 4.9. Yŏng-sik tries to fix the crane	142
Figure 4.10. Ch'ang Chin spies on the couple	143
Figure 4.11. The comic portrayal of Ch'ang Chin	143
Figure 4.12. Chasing the duck	144
Figure 4.13. Sun-hŭi's mother on her shopping spree	145
Figure 4.14. Ch'ang Chin reprimanded for his misdeeds	146
Figure 5.1. Monroe in <i>Something's Got to Give</i> (1962)	151
Figure 5.2. An anti-American pantomime in <i>Merry Ring</i>	178
Figure 5.3. Chin-gyu scales an apartment building	179
Figure 5.4. A fight scene between Chin-gyu and the circus monkey	180
Figure 5.5. Chin-gyu loses his pants under the dome	182
Figure 5.6. An acrobatic performance scene from <i>Merry Ring</i>	183
Figure 5.7. Orlova as Marion Dixon in Aleksandrov's <i>Tsirk</i> (1936)	185
Figure 5.8. Chin-gyu between the serious and the comic	187
Figure 6.1. North Korean animation in the 1960s	192
Figure 6.2. A scene from <i>Boy Artist</i>	213

Figure 6.3. A scene from <i>Black Rabbit</i> (1963)	217
Figure 6.4. A four-fingered puppet	219
Figure 6.5. A scene from <i>Ingöl and the Snowman</i>	220
Figure 6.6. A scene from an anti-American animated film	232

“[It] is always good to remind ourselves that we mustn’t take people for fools.”

Michel de Certeau

“The noble person is conciliatory but not conformist, the small person is
conformist but not conciliatory.”

Confucius

1. Introduction



Figure 1.1. Hyon Sun and her parents watch mass games on TV

1.1 Beyond Harlequins and Pierrots

In one of the scenes of Daniel Gordon's documentary, *A State of Mind* (2004), which follows two North Korean child gymnasts through their arduous training for the 2003 Pyongyang mass games, Hyon Sun and her family gather in front of a TV in their living-room to watch the broadcast of the event. As their eyes are fixed upon the screen, it is neither the grandeur of the spectacle, nor its political meaning that they are all so interested in. The reason this North Korean family is excited about this show of nationalist prowess, in the first place, is because Hyon Sun's mother is in the audience, and it is her that they are trying to identify among hundreds of identically looking individuals. While what Hyon Sun and her parents say on camera never strays away from

the official line, their gaze betrays a strikingly different personal motive. “Let’s see if your mom looks OK on TV,” the girl’s father jokes, as the three of them start arguing with one another about which one of these people is Hyon Sun’s mom (Figure 1.1, 1.2).¹ It is at that moment that the larger-than-life historical pageant becomes merely a backdrop for one family’s untold story of everyday struggles, hopes, and joys.



Figure 1.2. Hyon Sun tries to identify her mother on TV

North Korea has commanded the interest of scholars and pundits around the globe since the country appeared on the map in 1948 following Japan’s defeat in World War II. Over the past sixty years, this interest has hardly faded, partly because North Korea continues to remain a conundrum for everyone, despite the growing number of studies coming out each year. Yet, until only quite recently, most research on North Korea had

¹ Daniel Gordon, *A State of Mind* (New York: Kino on Video, 2004), DVD.

largely ignored the ordinary individual, privileging, instead, important political figures and major historical events in telling the story of the country's national becoming. The drastically new geopolitical situation of the early 1990s, however, has affected the conventional narrative of North Korean history. One of the important developments of the post-Cold War era has been a growing prominence of individual voices and stories of ordinary men and women who were able to escape from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in search of better economic opportunities and greater political freedom in the outside world.

Sadly enough, for many of these refugees, their stories of persecution and flight have become their only source of livelihood, once outside North Korea. Having entered the marketplace of humanitarian suffering and relief, their only goods now are their own pain and loss, which they have to recount ceaselessly to the world in order to validate their newly found status, as well as the mission of their new benefactors. Within this radically reconfigured political reality, which avowedly champions the rights and freedoms of these individuals, their personal voices yet again become compromised, manipulated, and subordinated to the larger goal of producing a new powerful counter-narrative. What is even more ironic is that their collective participation in the intellectual labor of producing this counter-narrative often only serves to maintain the oppressive system they fled from, since many defectors continue to support their families and relatives back in the North financially through an elaborate underground network that allows them to send money and goods across an increasingly porous border with China, all the while they are denouncing the regime publicly.

In a strange, almost schizophrenic, way, then, our view of North Korea bifurcates into two mutually contradictory perspectives. On the one hand, we have a carefully constructed official version of what North Korea is – its utopian self-representation. On the other hand, we have the exact opposite of this self-image – its othered dystopian reversal. Clearly, both are not merely partial, but are, in fact, ersatz representations of a much more complex reality, each of which on its own can only provide us with a false sense of understanding of our subject through leveling down any paradoxes and inconsistencies that do not easily fit into this rigid binary model. Thus, one construct will always deny even a possibility of mistake, lest acknowledge any deliberate wrongdoing, in the system, while the other construct will never admit that there might ever be any positive outcome, even if unintended, as far as North Korea is concerned, lest such a statement plays into the hands of the enemy. Nor do these antagonistic models work well together, given the unbridgeable gap between their respective positions on the nature of North Korean state and society.

While these two conventional approaches may have some limited methodological utility, I consider them both deeply ahistorical in that they both always offer, essentially, the same ready-made answers to the myriad of messy questions that History poses to us every day. They both embrace a telos, whether positive or negative, in charting out their respective schematic, unidirectional trajectories of national rise or decline. The voices they allow, too, are only important as part of a chorus that sings their litany and helps make their message more emotionally appealing to the potential convert. Although both try to put a human face on what otherwise would be a highly impersonal history based on statistical generalizations, they both only end up peddling in no more than masks. No

wonder, we are forced to see North Korea through such contrived and lifeless masks as either a land of perpetual Harlequins or Pierrots.

When I first traveled to North Korea in the fall of 2000, I witnessed something quite different. The three months I spent in Pyongyang as an exchange student from Moscow became for me the time of, probably, the most intimate and profound encounter with the true faces of North Korean society. Although since then I had a chance to meet and develop some close personal relationships with a number of North Korean refugees, there is absolutely nothing, in my opinion, that can compare to observing real people in their natural element. At a time when my Korean language skills were still rather rudimentary, the only thing left to me then was to rely on other cues when interacting with Koreans in the North, that is, the tone of their voice and their facial expression, the look in their eyes and their body language. While some ten years later, I may not recall all the details of a particular conversation, what stays with me is the deeper impression of each individual encounter, as well as their sum total, the eyes and the faces of the people that passed before me every day that can tell much more, as I came to realize with time, than anything they could have communicated to me in spoken words.

If I were to sum up my experience in the DPRK, I could do it with just one word – walking. The four of us who came to Kim Il Sung University as exchange students from Russia walked almost everywhere, at least, two or three hours each day. Although we had transportation arranged for us from the place where we were staying in central Pyongyang to the campus, we took advantage of the service only in the mornings to get to class. The rest of the afternoon, which we usually had free, we would wander around Pyongyang, at times getting lost, but inevitably finding our way back to our apartment

near the Russian embassy. It is on those walks with often an undefined itinerary that I began to look more and more into the faces of hundreds of people I would pass by on the streets, at the bus stops, in the underground crossings, on the bridges, in the squares and parks. I recognized in them the same ordinary people I would encounter daily on the streets back home in Russia, with similar joys and sorrows appearing on their faces. As anonymous passersby, they felt neither the pressure to perform for us, even though we were foreigners, nor the need to hide from us behind a mask they would wear in public. Our encounters were fleeting, but they often seemed to touch upon something much deeper, something that is beyond verbal expression, almost primal I would say, especially at those moments when our eyes would unexpectedly lock, yet each would continue on his or her way without stopping to acknowledge this momentary chance meeting.

Some forty years earlier, a famous French artist, photographer, and filmmaker, Chris Marker, also visited North Korea. In what later was to become his signature style, he produced a photographic historical record of the changing faces of North Korea, both in a literal and a figurative sense. His 1959 book *Coréennes* (“Korean Women”) is a photo essay featuring over 120 black-and-white photographs of North Korean women and men at work and leisure.² Unlike the majority of available photographs of North Korean people, which tend to capture only their public masks, Marker’s images are what can be called candid, almost without fail catching his subjects by surprise and in the moment before they can realize what is really going on. Marker’s photographs are the few visual records we have today that approach that which is usually well guarded and hidden. (Figure 1.3, 1.4) Separated from his subjects by the camera lens, as well as by the

² Chris Marker, *Coréennes* (Paris: Court-Métrage), 1959.

language and cultural barriers, Marker was nonetheless able to produce an incredibly personal, humanized, and intimate portrait of a culture and society in flux at a crucial historical moment through the power of his gaze alone – a portrait that can tell us more, perhaps, about North Korea than the verbose textual accounts which lack that insight.



Figure 1.3. Candid faces of North Korea (1)



Figure 1.4. Candid faces of North Korea (2)

In a sense, Marker's scopic method and the visual economy that grows out of it has served as an inspiration and a model, as well as a methodological guide for my own research project. It has inspired me to look beyond the surface of carefully crafted self-representations we will be dealing with in this study for signs and clues that would help us unravel them, but also to recognize the inherent visual quality of any textual construction, essentially treating text as just another form of visual expression that uses words like the artist uses paints on a canvas. Both, that is, words and images, are only a means to express a concealed interiority of a thing, and what really matters at the end of

the day is not so much the *what* of that which they try to express, but the *how* of how they go about it. Put simply, we will learn more through focusing on the representational technique, its method, than on focusing on the subject of representation alone. This *how* will change depending on the medium and the genre, among other things, but it will inevitably be able to reveal more to us about the circumstances (and, perhaps, even the reasons) of a particular construction than the ostensible end result of this fabricating process.

Privileging the representational technique – the procedural *how* – especially when working with textual sources, will allow us to get a peek at the subject’s “candid face,” so to speak, his or her hidden reasons and motivations, even though they may not be readily apparent there for us, as in Chris Marker’s inimitable photographs. I experienced this problem of self-masking while in North Korea many times: the same people we would see every day on the street would act very differently with us, were we to meet them face-to-face outside that anonymous public domain. It almost seems as if we had easier access to their private personas in public as strangers than when we actually had to interact with the same people semi-privately. Although this “masquerade” is, by no means, unique to North Korea, since everyone always has more than one role to juggle, I had only experienced this kind of stark contrast between one’s public and private countenances once before, when I was growing up in the former Soviet Union. In North Korea, too, I was confronted with this nearly universal ability to chameleonize, constantly shifting between one’s public and private identities, an ability that suggests a certain concealed agency beneath the surface of outward conformity.

Among the various theorists who attempted to describe and explain this wondrous adaptive resilience that allows an individual to survive in the face of adverse environment and circumstances, Michel de Certeau was able to express it, perhaps, most accurately and elegantly at the same time. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he writes as follows:

If it is true that the grid of “discipline” is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also “miniscule” and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them, and finally, what “ways of operating” form the counterpart, on the consumer’s (or “dominee’s”?) side, of the mute processes that organize the establishment of socioeconomic order. These “ways of operating” constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production.³

De Certeau argues that these everyday procedures and ruses compose the so-called “network of antidiscipline” within an increasingly totalitarian modern state.⁴ He goes on to identify the individual who engages in these everyday practices of resistance to the encroaching technocratic systems of discipline and control in terms of tactical ploys and tricks, suggesting that the only way to adapt to them is by detaching oneself from them in order to outwit and manipulate these very same dehumanizing mechanisms, so that, ultimately, one can enjoy oneself while being at play with the very order that contains this fleeting and massive social activity.⁵

Unlike other theorists of the everyday, such as Fernand Braudel or Henri Lefebvre who viewed the everyday as relatively immutable structures of the so-called *longue durée* (“long term”) or as a space of total domination by the hegemonic order engendered by

³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiv.

⁴ Ibid., xv.

⁵ Ibid., xxiv.

modernity, de Certeau conceptualized it as a space always allowing its subjects room for maneuver, drawing attention to the inherent “inventiveness of the everyday” in order to redress the top-down bias of Foucault’s critique of the microtechnologies of power.⁶ Essentially, the protagonist of de Certeau’s history of the everyday is neither a victim, nor a fool, although he does fool around quite a bit. Since his fragile freedom constantly depends on outwitting and outmaneuvering the system, he could be called a *jester* in his own right.

So, who is this maneuvering North Korean jester, if there is one, who has not broken or fled, despite all the pressures of everyday struggle for survival? Are the vast majority of people who are still living in North Korea engaged in what de Certeau calls the everyday “politics of such ploys”⁷ or are they the loyal subjects the regime wants us to see (or, conversely, the brainwashed masses who have surrendered all their individuality to the state, as some political scientists would argue)? In other words, who is an ordinary North Korean in whose name the historian writes his chronicles and do we have a chance to see, even if briefly, his private faces behind the deliberate masks he is forced to wear in order to survive?

1.2 The Jester in North Korean History

⁶ Derek Schilling, “Everyday Life and the Challenge to History in Postwar France: Braudel, Lefebvre, Certeau,” *Diacritics* 33:1 (Spring, 2003): 23-40. Also see: Alf Lüdtke, ed. *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, trans. by William Templer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Harry Harootunian, *History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁷ Ibid., xxiv.

If de Certeau's trickster is defined through his wit and playful irony that enables him to constantly adjust and adapt to the changing circumstances, then viewing how the practice of laughter has changed over time in relation to the increasingly disciplinarian state may help us determine whether our hypothetical North Korean jester might be, indeed, a historically and culturally specific figure, after all, rather than merely a theoretical abstraction. But where do we look for him, even if we were to find one? If we assumed for a moment the point of view of the state, we would, probably, first look for him in places where his activity would be both most conspicuous and disruptive to our goals, so that we can counteract this budding "network of antidisziplin" before it fully develops into a serious threat.

In his taxonomy of everyday practices, de Certeau lists such quotidian activities as reading, talking, walking, dwelling, and cooking. While investigating the histories around each category would call for a separate study in its own right, I decided to focus on what was, perhaps, the most prominent area where the state felt it could have both the greatest impact and the most tangible results to measure its own success – reading. "From TV to newspapers, from advertising to all sorts of mercantile epiphanies, our society is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey," de Certeau writes. He continues:

It is a sort of *epic* of the eye and of the impulse to read. The economy itself, transformed into a "semeiocracy" (26), encourages a hypertrophic development of reading. Thus, for the binary set production-consumption, one would substitute its more general equivalent: writing-reading. Reading (an image or a text), moreover, seems to constitute the maximal development of the passivity assumed to characterize the

consumer, who is conceived as a voyeur (whether troglodytic or itinerant) in a “show biz society.”⁸

If that is, indeed, where most of the action happens, we must, then, turn to the North Korean visual culture and the North Korean cinema, in particular, to see what kind of tactical misreadings the North Korean audiences have performed. We must bear in mind, however, that the jester-consumer the North Korean state is after (and so are we in this study) is not really any one single individual, but rather an identity anyone can adopt and discard at one’s own will. In other words, what we will be following are particular instances and situations when this playful nonconformist persona is embraced and indulged by the ordinary individual. Therefore, each chapter of this work will not only explore a different scene which becomes the stage for the jester’s ruses and ploys, but also a different empirical incarnation of the jester altogether.

What unites all these historical vignettes, if you will, is the state’s overarching strategy to contain and discipline this culture of antidiscipline through the medium of cinema. Hence, the jester is dealt with as the member of the audience, and if he is not one yet, then he has to be turned into one. In this vein, one of North Korean film critics has remarked that even before a child becomes an independent reader, he is already a “consummate film viewer” (*wanjŏnhan yŏnghwa kwallamja*).⁹ Clearly, visual literacy is so dominant in our modern society (and increasingly so) that it often precedes textual literacy and sometimes even displaces it. No wonder that it was through cinema that the North Korean state tried to occupy its chameleon jesters with the orthodox laughter that

⁸ Ibid., xxi.

⁹ Hong Kŏn, “Adongdŭl e taehan sahoejuŭijŏk aegukchuŭi kyoyang kwa yŏnghwa” [Socialist patriotic education and films about children], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1959): 23.

would enhance, rather than undermine the state's capacity for social control, and the creation of a film comedy genre uniquely suited to that purpose was Pyongyang's central preoccupation in the post-Korean War years, as this study will show.

The ordinary individual – the jester with chameleon faces – has never been the protagonist of any North Korean history written to date. Most histories of North Korea choose to focus on big historical actors and major historical events, treating the ostensibly drab everydayness as the filler between the critical high points of supposedly much more exciting historical narratives. But can there really ever be a sphere of noneveryday eventfulness that is completely separate and independent of the everyday domain? No major historical figure or event has ever emerged out of nowhere – they are all outgrowths of their unique contexts and they are always inextricably embedded in them.

It is thus always a matter of historical contingency that small, unimportant actors turn into big, important figures and that mundane, routine events erupt into major, and often quite dramatic, watersheds. Since none of us can know for certain when a little man might turn into a big shot, we must treat his mundane actions with equal importance. Even if today he seems to be only one of thousands of extras in someone else's film, tomorrow he might wake up to find himself a director of his own picture (Figure 1.5). But even if that never comes to pass, his actions may be having a far greater impact on the context, that is, on someone else's ongoing production than we might suspect.

1.3 Review of Existing Scholarship

Everyday life in North Korea has not been dealt with extensively in existing scholarship apart from a handful of recent monographs. One of the first books to address

the subject was Andrei Lankov's *North of the DMZ: Essays on Daily Life in North Korea* published in 2007.¹⁰ Aimed more at a general reader than an academic audience, this popular work largely synthesizes the author's extensive personal experience traveling to the DPRK, while many essays never, in fact, move away from an institutional perspective on the day-to-day operations of the North Korean society.



Figure 1.5. Finding the everyday

Barbara Demick's 2010 book *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* is similar in that way only that instead of sharing her own experiences in North Korea the author records fascinating personal accounts of everyday living and struggle related to

¹⁰ Andrei Lankov, *North of the DMZ: Essays on Daily Life in North Korea* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2007).

her by several North Korean defectors she met in Seoul and interviewed over the course of seven years.¹¹ While a wellspring of remarkably interesting detail about the everyday, as well as a great source of personal life stories and individual voices, Demick's book can hardly be called a scholarly work, either.

Along the same lines, we could also add a few memoirs written by North Korean defectors themselves and translated into English, the best known of them being Kang Chol-hwan's *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag*,¹² and travelogues, such as Guy Delisle's graphic novel *Pyongyang: A Journey to North Korea*.¹³ Other monographs, even those penned by scholars of North Korea, usually touch upon the subject only in passing. For example, Bruce Cumings' *North Korea: Another Country* only has one chapter on daily life based on the author's brief visits to the country and, like other popular literature, is targeted at the widest possible audience.¹⁴

Fortunately, however, this popular interest in the everyday life in North Korea has led to several monograph-length studies by Korean historians in the United States. One of them is Jeehyung Kim's doctoral dissertation entitled "The Furnace is Breathing: Work and the Everyday Life in North Korea, 1953 – 1961," which explores the everyday life of the North Korean worker in the post-Korean War decade.¹⁵ Another important work and the first truly scholarly study on the subject is Suzy Kim's recently published book

¹¹ Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010).

¹² Kang Chol-hwan and Pierre Rigoulot, trans. by Yair Reiner, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

¹³ Guy Delisle, *Pyongyang: A Journey to North Korea* (Montréal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2005).

¹⁴ Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: New Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Jeehyung Kim, "The Furnace is Breathing: Work and the Everyday Life in North Korea, 1953 – 1961" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2010).

entitled *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945 – 1950*, which focuses on the post-Liberation period, looking at how North Korean peasants dealt with the sweeping changes through which the new socialist state tried to completely reorganize their daily lives.¹⁶ If the former work focuses more on the question of how the state was able to exercise control over everyday life, the latter approaches the sphere of the everyday as the place “where choice and constraint meet.”¹⁷ Another important intervention is under way by a prominent historian of modern Korea, Andre Schmid, who is currently working on a new book project on North Korean domesticity during the period of the 1950s.

Among film historians, on the other hand, few scholars have written on comedy or humor in North Korean cinema. Most monographs in Korean only tangentially mention comedy films,¹⁸ while those that are on comedy in theater focus primarily on the analysis of generic conventions rather than broader socio-cultural and historical contexts and the issue of audience reception.¹⁹ The situation is not much different in more scant English-language scholarship on North Korean cinema, which usually limits itself to the

¹⁶ Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ For general histories of North Korean cinema in Korean, see the following: Ch’oe Ch’ök-ho, *Pukhan yŏnghwasa* [History of North Korean Cinema] (Sŏul: Chimmundang, 2000); Min Pyŏng-uk, *Pukhan yŏnghwa ŭi yŏksajŏk ihae* [Historical Understanding of North Korean Cinema] (Sŏul: Yŏngnak, 2005); Yi Myŏng-ja, *Pukhan yŏnghwasa* [History of North Korean Cinema] (Sŏul: K’ŏmyunik’eisyŏn Buksŭ, 2007); Chŏn Yŏng-sŏn, *Pukhan yŏnghwa sok ŭi sam iyagi* [Stories of Everyday Life in North Korean Cinema] (Sŏul: Kŭl Nurim, 2006); Chŏng Chae-hyŏng p’yŏn *Pukhan yŏnghwa e taehae algo sip’ŭn tasŏt kaji: che 2-sedae Pukhan yŏnghwa yŏn’gu* [Five Things to Know about North Korean Cinema: A Second-Generation Study of North Korean Cinema] (Kyŏnggi-do P’aju-si: Chimmundang, 2004); Chŏng T’ae-su, *Nam-Pukhan yŏnghwasa pigyo yŏn’gu, 1945-2006* [A Comparative Study of South and North Korean Film Histories, 1945-2006] (Sŏul-si: Kukhan charyonwŏn, 2007).

¹⁹ Min Pyŏng-uk, Ku, Myŏng-ok p’yŏn, *Pukhan kyŏnghŭigŭk* [North Korean Light Comedy] (Sŏul: Yŏn’gŭk kwa In’gan, 2002).

questions of the medium's role and uses as an instrument of official propaganda.²⁰ A welcome departure from this conventional view of North Korean cinema would be Immanuel Kim's current work on humor and satire in North Korean film during the 1970s and 1980s.²¹

While interest in the history of the everyday is growing slowly, but surely, there is still a great deal that needs to be done. In this respect, what this project hopes to accomplish is to situate historically the quotidian mechanisms by means of which agency is exercised by the individual in North Korea within the theoretical framework proposed by Michel de Certeau. My study, thus, positions itself at the intersection of several histories – social, cultural, and film – exploring three interrelated areas on which no research exists today, that is, leisure, laughter, and film spectatorship in the DPRK. Pointing to a concealed, yet powerful agency within an ordinary individual, which enables him to weather the changing political winds, economic crises, and social upheavals and go on with his daily life, the terms employed in this study, such as the jester, the film viewer, and the consumer, should be understood accordingly as alluding to and converging upon a complex identity suggested by de Certeau, rather than as distinct and separate categories.

²⁰ For example, see: Lee Hyangjin, *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture, and Politics* (Manchester, UK; New York: Manchester University Press, 2001); Schönherr, Johannes, *North Korean Cinema: A History* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012); Armstrong, Charles. "The Origins of North Korean Cinema: Art and Propaganda in the Democratic People's Republic." In *Acta Koreana* 5:1 (January 2002): 1-19.

²¹ This work is still in its early stage and has not been published yet. One might want to take a look at Immanuel Kim's dissertation where he briefly addresses the issue of humor and satire in North Korean literature of the 1970s and 1980s. For more, see: Immanuel Kim, "North Korean Literature: Margins of Writing Memory, Gender, and Sexuality" (Ph.D. diss., University of California Riverside, 2012).

1.4 Methodology

While Michel de Certeau's notion of the everyday as a sphere of creative inventiveness and tactical resistance together with Chris Marker's photographic practice provide an overall methodological orientation for this work, my actual analytical method when it comes down to working with textual and visual sources is based on the theories developed by a prominent Russian literary scholar, philosopher, and linguist Mikhail Bakhtin and, in particular, his concepts of *heteroglossia* and *dialogism*. In his well-known essay, "Slovo v Romane" ("Discourse in the Novel"), Bakhtin defines *heteroglossia*, or *raznorechie* in Russian, as a hybrid construction that mixes two or more statements belonging to different linguistic styles. These different "languages," as he calls them, with their respective worldviews, are usually combined seamlessly within the novel without any formal boundaries separating them. These invisible dividing lines run through a syntactic whole (usually within the same sentence) so that the same word can belong to different "languages" at the same time, enabling an internal *dialogic* relationship between various parts of this kind of hybrid linguistic construction.²²

Essentially, Bakhtin's notion of *heteroglossia* recognizes the multiplicity of voices within a tightly woven fabric of articulations, which defines the novel. What is truly groundbreaking about his idea of semantic polyphony is that it goes beyond simply identifying the distinct voices of the author and various characters to highlight the much more complex hybridity contained within the same enunciating subject. In other words, voices initially belonging to different originating subjects become commonly separated

²² M.M. Bakhtin, "Slovo v romane" in *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh, t. 3: Teoriia romana (1930-1966 gg.)* [Collected works in 7 volumes, vol. 3: Theory of the novel] (Moskva: Iazyki slavianskikh kul'tur, 2012), 57, 78.

from their sources and intermingled with other voices, thus blurring the distinction between what comes from within and what comes from without. This constant process of assimilation of foreign voices into the master voice of the novel identified with the author is at the heart of writing. The final meta-text, then, becomes a palimpsest of all the bits and pieces of primary sources, so to speak, which go into its construction. The traces of heterogeneity are never, however, completely effaced, surviving in the stylistic, grammatical, and lexical variation, which marks the meta-text.

The original Russian word *raznorechie* also captures another important nuance which is lost in the English translation of the term as *heterglossia*. *Raznorechie* is a compound lexical unit made up of two separate words – *razniy* (“different, other”) and *rech’* (“speech”). The latter is a cognate of the words *ruchei* and *reka*, Russian for “stream” and “river,” respectively. Both *rech’* and its two cognates point to the flowing quality of both human speech and water. Just like water can dissolve most other substances or, at least, incorporate them into itself, so does human speech have the capacity to weave various disparate articulations, affects, and intents into a single fluid unity. While we cannot always determine accurately what other elements may be admixed to the water without running its sample through a chemical analysis test, we can usually tell something about its taste, smell, color, temperature, and overall quality without recourse to sophisticated technical measurements.

This understanding of Bakhtin’s original concept has informed my own approach to both textual and visual sources that I use in my work. Paying close attention to such variables as the choice of words, the form of address, the overall tone, as well as spatial, temporal, and discursive placement of the material in relation to other materials and

variation within its successive iterations has enabled me to take my analysis beyond the level of words and ostensible meanings. In order to undertake this kind of close reading, it was essential that I have access to a full run of the key journals I am working with within the temporal boundaries of my project. In other words, rather than focusing on a select number of major articles and documents directly relevant to my research agenda, I would pay as much attention to the intervening informational “gaps.”

This focus of the immediate, originating context has proved to be a wellspring of intellectual blessing. The tiny fragments recovered from other host texts have often turned into important clues leading to new insights and important discoveries. As one example, a passing mention of film exchanges between North Korea and the Soviet Union during the 1950s in one of my sources prompted me to wonder whether the Soviet Union might have preserved the copies of those films in its archives, which, as it turned out, was indeed the case, leading to an important discovery for the history of Korean cinema, as a whole.²³

I also read the North Korean periodicals as *heterglossic* texts in their own right. Thus, if we think of the common discursive field in our case in terms of the syntactic whole, we can then begin to distinguish between several, often overlapping, “languages” within it, which splits the apparent unity of official discourse. The voices in this discursive chorus whose traces survive on the pages of North Korean journals mix various perspectives, often within the same essay, while belonging to institutionally, personally, and conceptually different agents of enunciation. One of my key sources – the film journal *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* (“Korean Film”) – presents an interesting case in point. As

²³ V.S. Mironov, ed. *15 Let Osvobozhdeniia Korei* [15 years since Korea’s liberation] (Moskva: Izd-vo IMO, 1960), 115.

the only specialized periodical on cinema in North Korea, it catered to a diverse and broad audience from industry professionals to ordinary cinephiles, which explains why it was able to emerge as what in Bakhtin's terminology would be called *dialogic* site, a forum that brought together both informed and lay opinions to bear upon an ongoing and evolving discussion of issues in contemporary North Korean film theory and practice.

1.5 Sources

In a way, this whole project started with my discovery of a lost North Korean film I was fortunate enough to find in the Russian Film Archive, or Gosfilmofond, during my first research trip there in the summer of 2009. Remarkably, the film I came across while looking through Gosfilmofond's catalogues was a North Korean satirical comedy from 1958, *Uri sawi, uri myŏnŭri* ("Our son-in-law, our daughter-in-law"), which had never been mentioned in any literature on North Korean cinema I was familiar with. Moreover, to my knowledge, Pyongyang had not made any *satirical* comedies before the early 2000s, yet there was this film that attested to the contrary. My discovery of the unknown comedy provided a reason for me to look more closely at the context in which this text emerged and investigate the circumstances of its mysterious disappearance.

As I began to dig more and more into the context, I started to realize that the serendipitously discovered film was merely a tip of a huge iceberg – hidden behind it was a truly remarkable story waiting to be told of North Korea's short-lived flirtation with satire in the 1950s and the long-term consequences of that encounter for the country's cinema, society, and its political establishment. Although ignored by scholars in the past,

other Russian archives, too, have proved to be an invaluable source of critical materials and documents, which helped me put together the remaining pieces of this fascinating puzzle. After scouring numerous primary sources for clues to the riddle I embarked to solve, it gradually became clear to me which ones contained the richest and most relevant information that would help me answer my questions.

I, thus, came to focus on two North Korean periodicals – a satirical current events magazine *Hwa(l)sal* (“Arrow”) and a film journal *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* (“Korean Film”) – in order to reconstruct the historical context of contemporary debates on the production and consumption of the comic in cinema and beyond with as much scrupulous detail as was possible. Of course, the problematic of the comic in North Korean culture and society can hardly be contained by these two sources, and I necessarily bring in other materials, as well, including a variety of journals, newspapers, monographs, diplomatic communications, and memoirs, to name a few, even though the subject matter in question may be more peripheral to them, in order to show the sheer extent of the issue of the comic and its resonance in a variety of other areas. The above two journals, however, allowed me to explore the originating context I discussed earlier both in depth and in breadth.

What a close reading of *Hwa(l)sal* and *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* journals for the period between 1953 and 1969 enabled me to do was trace a number of overlapping conversations among cultural producers, bureaucrats, filmmakers, critics, and readers pertaining to the question of the comic in North Korean society in all their richness and complexity, as they evolved over time. Since most of those discussions by necessity involved films in one way or another, my story of the North Korean jester and his

relationship with the media-making state also becomes inseparably interwoven with the histories of North Korean cinema. Many of the films from the 1950s and 1960s that I mention, however, still remain unavailable to us today, which means that we have to content ourselves, at least, for the time being with their descriptions and analyses left to us by the earlier generation. But, the two key films that do bear on our discussion, that is, North Korea's first "satirical comedy" (*p'ungja hŭigŭk*) from 1958 and its first "light comedy" (*kyŏng hŭigŭk*) from 1966, neither of which had previously been the subject of a serious scholarly study, have now become available through the author's original research.

Since my interest primarily concerns the role of cinema in the formation, both deliberate and inadvertent, of a jesting subject, my analysis, therefore, draws largely on materials that reflect the circumstances of this process, whether in a direct or indirect way. If laughter had not been recognized by the North Korean state as a power that needs to be harnessed and disciplined, it is possible that we would not have had a reason today, in the first place, to call North Korea's everyday masquerade into question. Fortunately for us, that is not the case: as the evidence presented in this study strongly suggests, we have been fooled only for too long by the deceiving appearance of near-universal North Korean conformism.

1.6 Chapter Summaries

This study is comprised of five chapters. Chapter 1 explores a fascinating historical connection between two phenomena that largely defined the cultural climate of

the 1950s in North Korea – the massive production of social and political satire by the state, on the one hand, and the pervasive practice of street play, or street jesting, among ordinary people, on the other. This chapter makes an argument that street play was enabled, in part, by the lack of leisure infrastructure in the wake of postwar destruction and economic recession following the Korean War (1950-53) and, in part, by the new cultural policy which promoted satire far and wide, even encouraging ordinary people to take part in its production.

In a way, the emergence of a street jester as a distinct cultural category could be linked to the unintended consequences of some of the new policies hastily implemented by the government, which I examine in this chapter. Among them was a massive and somewhat rushed campaign to translate foreign works of literature into Korean, which often created new laughing-matter in its own right, inadvertently transforming the serious into the absurd. Another crucial factor was the representation of contemporary everyday life by such popular periodicals as *Hwa(l)sal* (“Arrow”) and *Cho-Sso Ch’insŏn* (“Korean-Soviet Friendship”) through visual satire. Framing the mundane and the trivial as inherently comical, these publications endowed, if only unwittingly, the errant behavior with a certain aura of attractiveness and appeal.

The dissertation’s first chapter situates the beginnings of the 1950s street play in what I call the “culture of fragmentation,” which was made possible by the new emphasis on the modes and techniques of satirical representation, as well as by the general breakdown and fragmentation of the physical spaces of everyday leisure. Viewed by the state as a petty hooligan, the street jester becomes both a new cultural identity and the target of official reform. In this chapter, I implicate the postwar state in the creation of its

own golem through bringing him to life in discourse and representation. Performing his ruses and tricks anonymously in public spaces, the elusive street jester frustrated the state's attempts at containing him and undoing the havoc he wreaked. More importantly, as the chapter explains, the street jester subverted official goals of political education by turning them into opportunities for self-devised entertainment.

Whereas the first chapter looks at how contemporary satirical representations, among other things, helped interpellate the street jester as a new cultural subject, chapter 2 of this dissertation examines another important site where this process flourished, perhaps, the most, albeit in a very different way, – the movie theater. If the satirical cartoons of the 1950s and early 1960s instilled a certain self-awareness in the street jesters and, in part, assisted in valorizing their everyday pranks by virtue of making these flesh-and-blood characters the popular heroes of contemporary comics, granting them discursive presence and representational existence, a typical movie theater, on the other hand, provided all the necessary conditions for these jesters to practice their sport with little inhibition.

The chapter focuses on two distinct modes of film spectatorship – one associated with workplace cinemas and one with regular neighborhood movie theaters – to show how tactical conformism operated in North Korean society in everyday life. Taking a close look at the numerous problems involved in film production, distribution, and exhibition during this period, I argue that the so-called “cinema of fits and starts” of the 1950s, which was largely defined by virtually unending technical glitches and failures at almost every stage, turned any moviegoing experience into a farce, not unlike the poorly translated foreign literature at the time discussed in the previous chapter would transform

the serious into the absurd. Unlike inadequate literary translations, however, technically compromised film shows were essentially a communal experience centered on the “technological striptease” of the disintegrating cinematic apparatus, so to speak.

My discussion of the “cinema of fits and starts” highlights the ways in which the beleaguered North Korean film industry created a new locus of inadvertent comedy in the failing cinematic apparatus, thereby both inciting the jesting activity in the audience and, perforce, transforming official audiovisual texts into impromptu entertainment. While audience jesters described here were not always ontologically identical with street jesters introduced in chapter 1, there was often a significant overlap between these two demographics. In other words, jesting as an everyday practice was never truly confined to any one place, nor limited to any one group, but was, instead, a fluid identity that could be embraced by any individual under favorable circumstances.

Chapter 3 tells the story of North Korea’s “forgotten” first comedy and its maker, director Yun Chae-yŏng. After years of trying unsuccessfully to tame rambunctious audiences, the state decides to take the situation into its own hands by radically changing the previously ineffective strategy and appointing an official jester who would discipline the moviegoing public’s errant laughter. In a way, the satirical comedy film Yun creates, *Uri sawi, uri myŏnŭri* (“Our Son-in-Law, Our Daughter-in-Law,” 1958), becomes an official response to the ongoing challenge of spontaneous jesting the state is having the hardest time controlling. My reading of this important film, to which no scholar had previous access, brings to the fore the role of its forsaken creator in the history of North Korean comedy.

I argue that the fiasco of Yun's comedy foreclosed a real possibility of a director-centered *auteur* cinema in North Korea during the late 1950s – some twenty years before the mysterious disappearance of an iconic South Korean film director, Shin Sang-ok, and his wife, actress Choi Eun-hee, and their subsequent reappearance in the North as alleged victims of a high-profile abduction. Based on my analysis of this film, I argue that Yun overturned the principles of satirical exaggeration by miscalculating which characters and to what degree should be comicalized, thereby creating a politically ambiguous portrayal of North Korea's contemporary reality in the midst of continuing anti-Soviet purges, student defections abroad, and Kim Il Sung's growing personality cult. As a result, his film reveals more than it glosses over, bringing the dead serious out of what should have been uncompromisingly comical. Yun's failure to negotiate the two distinct varieties of the comic – satire and humor – in his film, in many ways, defined the future course of North Korean cinema, leading to the developments of the 1960s discussed in the following two chapters.

The problems that Yun's rejected comedy raised concerning representation, realism, and the use of various comic techniques become the subject of heated debates in North Korean film circles during the 1960s, as the industry continues its search for the magic formula that would turn the wayward spectator into a compliant consumer of officially sanctioned entertainment. Chapter 4 examines these historically important debates, revealing how the new principles of film comedy were finally produced by the contemporary discourse through negotiations between filmmakers, critics, audiences, and the state. Focusing on the representative production of this period, Kim Yŏng's 1966

light comedy film *Myŏngnangghan mudae* (“The Merry Ring”), this chapter discusses the influence of Hollywood comedy on North Korea’s new cinematic theory and practice.

In particular, my discussion here explores the question of how North Korean filmmakers approached the issue of pleasure in creating the new film genre. While contemporary film critics tried to deepen film appreciation among filmgoers by fostering critical cinephilia as an antidote to the rampant culture of antidiscipline within the movie theater described in chapter 2, filmmakers focused their efforts, instead, on adopting the techniques and methods of their “progressive” Western counterparts in the areas of screenwriting, directing, acting, and scoring. As a culmination of these debates, *The Merry Ring* puts their lessons into practice, inaugurating a new era in North Korean cinema.

The state’s success with finally creating an acceptable film comedy by the mid-1960s, however, does not mean that the problem of the comic had been resolved once and for all. In fact, as North Korean filmmakers and critics were staking out the principles of film comedy, another area of cinematic practice seemed to defy all their insights and findings, calling for a completely different strategy altogether. Chapter 5 examines North Korean experiments with children’s films and animation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, showing how contemporary film theory was forced to embrace mischief as a fundamental element of child psychology, despite the industry’s initial attempts to throw it overboard. I argue that the rejection of juvenile mischief resulted in uncanny audiovisual productions, leading to audience alienation, contrary to the authors’ original intentions. In animation, on the other hand, filmmakers had to deal with the issue of the inadvertent grotesque, over which they gradually were able to gain a degree of control. At

the same time, they had to acknowledge that the grotesque was part of the medium itself and could not be completely eliminated.

In a way, the problem of the text's inherent polysemy, frequently raised by the 1960s discourse in the form of discussions of a film's vagueness and ambiguity, becomes to a certain degree resolved through the establishment of clearly delineated principles and generic boundaries toward the end of the decade. The 1950s had opened the door for virtually an indiscriminate flow of any variety of the comic into the North Korean culture under the single banner of satire. Not all satire, however, that entered the country was, strictly speaking, satire, spanning a wide range of comic genres and techniques from gentle humor to crude farce. Yet, Pyongyang found that out only when the state took upon itself to produce its own "satire" across media. My final chapter shows that this process of domesticating the comic was not always without compromises, and, as the state came closer to understanding the subtle differences between particular kinds of laughter and the techniques that would generate them, it also realized the potential dangers of their unpremeditated intermingling.

As a whole, the five chapters of this dissertation interrogate the question of how unruly public laughter was disciplined by the nation's film industry in order to be deployed in the service of the state's political ends. My case studies demonstrate how the state's strategies of semantic control and regulation sometimes succeeded and sometimes backfired, often creating unanticipated results. In the end, we find ourselves as witnesses to the never-ending process of tactical manipulation of official representations causing so much alarm to the state by what at a first glance would appear to be a conformist public

through every individual's small everyday acts of play, whether on the streets, at work, or at the movies.

2. Jesters on the Streets

2.1 Introduction

On July 25, 2012, a recording of a North Korean news broadcast appeared on the Internet announcing Kim Jong Un's recent visit to a newly opened amusement park in central Pyongyang.²⁴ The tour of Rungna People's Pleasure Ground, which consists of a dolphinarium, a wading pool, a fun fair, and a mini golf course and is located on Rungna Islet on the Taedong river, by the nation's top brass was a marked departure from the familiar image of the North Korean people as overindocinated and undernourished, and the state as more preoccupied with satellite launches and secret weapons programs than the well-being of its citizens. While the opening of a new amusement complex in itself does not overwrite the fact that the state's ambitions may continue to lie elsewhere, it does bring home another little acknowledged fact that even in such repressive societies as North Korea there is room for play.

Before the state started showing interest in organized leisure of its citizens by way of erecting amusement parks, such as the new Rungna People's Pleasure Ground, and creating comedy films and stage musicals to fill the nation's movie theaters and playhouses, ordinary people would seek entertainment literally in the streets. Even the creation of community clubs in the early days of the North Korean state did not entirely displace this form of improvised self-entertainment, which continued to prevail

²⁴ "KCTV (Kim Jong Un and his wife Ri Sol Ju Visits Rungna People's Pleasure Ground)," YouTube video, 5:20, from a news broadcast televised on KCTV on July 24, 2012, posted by "rodrigo1," July 25, 2012, accessed on May 13, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0ZbzSkoYQI>.

throughout the postwar decade. In fact, poor management of these hastily constructed sites and overall lack and disrepair of the leisure infrastructure contributed to the growth of street play, which threatened the monopoly of officially designated spaces of organized leisure.

While rest from daily labor and recreation are a universal human need, each era will give rise to its own ludic practices bearing the age's indelible mark. In the case of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), founded in 1948 as a result of Korea's division by the Soviet and American occupation forces along the 38th parallel into northern and southern parts, this spirit of popular play became embodied, I argue, in the once ubiquitous practice of street jesting. Street jesting, or street play, initially arose in the early 1950s, in part, in response to new government policies, but quickly spun out of control, prompting the state to adopt new measures that would put an end to this unwanted and potentially subversive practice. Street play was one of the unintended consequences of the new cultural policy promoting social and political satire in literature, art, and everyday life, which characterized the cultural climate of the 1950s.

But before we can evaluate the new cultural policy that introduced satire into North Korea on a truly mass scale, as well as its short-term and long-term effects, we must first understand where Korean society stood in respect to satire prior to this critical historical moment. I, therefore, begin with a brief general overview of satire during the premodern, early modern, and colonial periods in order to see in which ways the 1950s practice diverged from the earlier traditions. My analysis highlights the relationship between the state's implementation of the new policy and the broader context of its reception. I argue that some of the policy's unintended consequences were the

interpellation of the jesting subject in discourse and representation and the emergence of an errant culture of street play.

2.2 Satire in the Premodern and Early Modern Periods

Han, variously translated as “sadness,” “regret,” “sorrow,” or “pent-up grief,” is an affect, perhaps, most readily associated with the Korean culture, continuing even today to dominate current discourses on Koreanness. These discourses, which emerged in Korea in the early 20th century, when the country was under Japanese colonial rule, have contributed to essentializing *han* as a peculiarly Korean trait and aesthetic. More recently, however, some revisionist scholars have attributed this development, at least, in part, to the Japanese influence during the modernization process.²⁵ In addition, the fact of Korea’s colonization and ensuing self-awareness of its victimized position must have also played an important role in further entrenching this belief.

While sad motifs are no doubt present in the rich corpus of Korean literature and oral tradition that predates the coming of the modern age, Korean culture, as a whole, had never really been lopsidedly melancholic to justify defining it through the sentiment of *han* alone. Jokes, puns, witty sayings, and funny folk-tales have always been part of the business of living and existed alongside the sadness inherent in some of the early works. Most of them had been scattered across a variety of genres and are often referred to by the term of *sohwa*, or “funny stories.” In reality, *sohwa* comprise a wide range of different comical forms from humor to parody to satire. For instance, the famous *Yongjae*

²⁵ Cho Dong-il, “Humour in Folk Poetry” in *Humour in Korean Literature*, ed. Chun Shin-Yong, (International Cultural Foundation: Seoul, Korea, 1977), 64.

ch'onghwa (“Assorted Writings of Yongjae”) includes over 50 instances of *sohwa*. Lecherous stories account for about one-third of these in *Yongjae ch'onghwa* and are believed to have influenced, both directly and not, later literary jest-books, satirical novels, and other genres.²⁶ It is only in the modern period that sadness as such begins to loom large and is, for the most part, found in the literature written self-consciously as art or for commercial distribution.²⁷

During the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1897), however, when the separation between the high and the low culture was particularly marked, humor, parody, farce, and satire were commonly identified with “vulgar” art forms associated with lower social classes. Thus, most vernacular genres, such as folk songs and mask dance, abounded in humor and satire, while the more “serious” literature – both verse and prose – produced by the literati and written in classical Chinese tended to privilege the grave and the somber over the light and the funny. The first known example of a humorous poem – *The Song of Choyong* – is said to date back to the 9th century. A translation of the original can be found below:

After having amused myself till late at night under the bright moon-lit sky of the capital, I returned home to find four legs in my bed. Two have been mine, but whose are the two? Originally, she was mine, but now taken away, alas, what shall I do?²⁸

The Song of Choyong brims with playfulness and sexual innuendo – a feature that continues to dominate vernacular genres through centuries. Scholars have characterized

²⁶ Im Myŏng-gŏl, “*Yongjae ch'onghwa* sojae ‘sohwa’ ūi yŏn’gu” [A study of “funny stories” collected in *Yongjae chonghwa*], *Hanmun hakpo* 25 (2011): 211-237.

²⁷ Cho, “Humour in Folk Poetry,” 65.

²⁸ Quoted from Kim Min Chan, “Humour Catholicized” in *Humour in Korean Literature*, ed. Chun Shin-Yong, (International Cultural Foundation: Seoul, Korea, 1977), 104.

Korean folk poetry, and even Korean literature of this period, as a whole, by its aesthetic propensity for humor. Even in those instances where sadness seems to be the dominant register, humor always exists alongside, preventing sorrow from sliding into excess and self-indulgence.²⁹

Some scholars have compared the traditional mask play, which was the principal form of traditional theater in Korea during the Chosŏn dynasty, with *commedia dell'arte*, although the former did not rely as much on improvisation as did its Western counterpart. Merry garrulity and naked vulgarism characteristic of most dialogues in the traditional mask plays are a mark of this genre. The use of wit, pun, and parody is also very common. Sometimes, mask plays would even offer parodies of Chinese poetry, but generally these productions would come from purely folk origins.³⁰

Korean mask plays served as a medium for the masses to ridicule the depraved Buddhist clergy and pour scorn upon the ruling *yangban* class, knocking them down with bitter satire.³¹ As a result, many scholars have tended to regard traditional mask plays as a form of popular resistance of the common folk to the ruling elites. Yoh Suk-kee, however, regards a certain theatricality embodied in what he calls the “spirit of *nori*” (“spirit of *play*”) to be at the heart of traditional mask play.³² While satirical elements by all means occupied a prominent place within the genre, they were usually used as a

²⁹ Cho, “Humour in Folk Poetry,” 64.

³⁰ Yoh Suk-Kee, “Laughter in the Korean Traditional Drama” in *Humour in Korean Literature*, ed. Chun Shin-Yong, (International Cultural Foundation: Seoul, Korea, 1977), 92.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

³² *Ibid.*, 98.

means to perform *nori* rather than an end in itself, Yoh argues, given the social backgrounds of both performers and audiences.

While there is a certain overlap between the *nori* of the traditional mask play and the 1950s street play, there are also important differences between the two. For one thing, *nori* would normally take place within a circumscribed space and time, as mask plays were performed in the open air usually lasting throughout the night.³³ There would also be a formal division between the troupe and the audience. In the case of street play, however, no such conditions were either absolute or even necessary: thus, just about any public space could be turned into an impromptu stage and any unsuspecting passerby could be turned into a member of the audience, if not a participant. In that sense, street play shares its spontaneous, improvised nature with *commedia dell'arte* which in contemporary accounts was called *commedia all'improvviso* (the term *commedia dell'arte* being of later origin) and which, unlike mask plays, were basically improvised performances loosely based on sketches or scenarios.

During the modern period, however, the boundary between high aristocratic and low popular culture began to become increasingly blurred. First Korean reformers, many of whom were educated in the West and in Japan, used satire to criticize various “backward” beliefs and customs still in currency in Korea. Although the didacticism of Korean “enlightenment” (*kaehwa*) quickly took center stage, satire was not completely foreign to the literature of the early modern period, either, and often took the form of short epics serialized in periodicals, such as *Taehan Maeil Shinbo* and *Cheguk Shinmun*. Comical elements can be also found in the so-called *sin sosŏl*, or new novels, and poetry from this period.

³³ Ibid., 83.

In analyzing *kaehwa* literature, Lee Jae-son points out that, “laughter and [the] comic [were] elevated to the height of social criticism.”³⁴ The objects of mockery were usually government officials and Japanese imperialist ambitions in Korea. If during the Chosŏn period satire aimed at corrupt government officials was largely part of the oral tradition transmitted through songs, verse, and performance, now we see the emergence of a new kind of political satire disseminated through a budding national press. Lee also mentions that the “enlightenment” period saw the emergence of allegorical novels in which animals figured as protagonists, tracing the origins of this genre back to the early fictional biographies written during the Koryŏ period (918 – 1392).³⁵ While political satire of the “enlightenment” period had its own unique features, in form it continued the tradition of naive comics, humorous writing, fictional biographies, allegorical novels, and ballads, Lee argues, further developing and transforming it to meet the new demands of the modern age.³⁶ At the same time, the new comic of the early modern period came to be increasingly identified with new modes of political satire, sarcasm, and criticism.

2.3 The Rise of the Playful Consumer

More changes followed with the advent of Japanese colonialism (1910 – 1945) in Korea in the first decade of the 20th century. As I already mentioned, the arrival of modern literature in Korea by way of Japan ushered a vogue for melancholic

³⁴ Lee Jae-son, “Laughter in the Literature of Enlightenment Period” in *Humour in Korean Literature*, ed. Chun Shing-Yong, (International Cultural Foundation: Seoul, Korea, 1977), 69.

³⁵ Ibid., 78.

³⁶ Ibid., 80.

sentimentality. While Korean folk poetry continued its long comic tradition, modern prose, verse, and music created during the colonial period, by contrast, were infused with a large dose of the *han* sentimentality, Kim Sowŏl's poetry, perhaps, being the best example of this larger trend.³⁷ In Korean theater, too, comedies almost completely disappeared with the emergence of new Westernized dramatic art, although "vulgar comedies" imbued with the sentimentalism of *sinp'agŭk*, or "new-school" drama, were not uncommon even in that time.³⁸

Yet, it would be mistaken to think that traditional comic genres had become completely displaced by the new forms. In fact, the comic itself took on a brand new modern garb in the form of new genres. One of them was the genre of essay (*sup'il*) which became extremely popular in the 1930s. Inspired and influenced by such well-known British essayists as Lamb, Thackeray, Milne, Gardner, Lynd and others, many modern Korean essayists, in turn, adopted these writers' forms and techniques in their own work, making wit and humor the mainstay of the new genre.³⁹

In addition to *sup'il*, the national press also helped introduce and popularize another new medium – cartoons. After the relaxation of publication laws following the March 1 movement of 1919, Korean press underwent its second renaissance after the dark years of Japan's *budan seiji*, or "military rule," which lasted from 1910 to 1919. It was then that cartoons became a common sight on the pages of most periodicals. Despite the continued practice of censorship, which had now been somewhat relaxed, but not

³⁷ Cho, "Humour in Folk Poetry," 65.

³⁸ Yoh, "Laughter in the Korean Traditional Drama," 98.

³⁹ Kim, "Humour Catholicized," 115.

completely abandoned, many newspapers were able to publish political cartoons, some of which were mildly critical of the colonial government.

Cartoons were produced both by professional cartoonists and by readers who submitted their work to newspapers and magazines. Ch'oe Yöl distinguishes between two kinds of cartoons made during this period: on the one hand, there were “people’s cartoons” (*minjung manhwa*), which were amateur submissions, often political in their choice of subject and critical in tone, and, on the other, “popular” (*t'ongsokjök*) cartoons made usually by professional cartoonists purely for “entertainment” (*orak*). By the late 1920s, however, as the colonial government began to crack down on political opposition and monitor more closely activists in the nationalist movement, most cartoons began to lose their critical edge and turn from political satire to more innocuous forms of humor.⁴⁰

This period almost immediately preceding the 1950s is particularly important for our discussion for, at least, two reasons. First of all, it was the time when what we could call Korea’s first truly “mass culture” came into existence through the proliferation of print media, radio, and cinema, which, by and large, remained to be the main forms of information, education, and entertainment available to Koreans even after the Liberation in 1945. It is noteworthy that these new modern forms usually combined all three functions, that is, they provided information, education, and entertainment all at once in the same issue, broadcast, or motion picture, conflating these previously distinct categories into a new hybrid form.

This important change had a profound impact on consumption practices, as well, leaving it up to the consumer now to decide what content and to what extent to

⁴⁰ For more, see Kimberly Mee Chung, “Mass Politics and Visual Culture: Proletarian Literature of 1920s and 1930s Colonial Korea (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2011).

appropriate. The introduction of these modern media formats alongside traditional genres of theater, poetry, song, and prose discussed above, which all continued to exist throughout this period, led to the emergence of a new type of modern consumer. The abundance of forms, both old and new, and the hybrid nature of modern media made it inevitable that the traditional *nori*, or play, became even further diffused into various new genres and forms. The play now became part of new media, allowing the modern consumer of the press, radio, and cinema far greater opportunities for laughter and comic release. In that sense, the modern consumer was also inherently a *playful* consumer.

Thus, the emergence of a mass culture and the rise of the playful consumer came to define the new cultural landscape of the colonial period. Although during the 1930s political satire took a back seat due to the growing persecution of Korean leftist nationalists by the colonial government, a new culture of apolitical “amusement” (*orak*), which gradually came to replace it, further solidified the playful identity of the modern consumer. As much as the modern consumer was now discouraged from openly questioning, criticizing, or otherwise undermining the incumbent government and its policies, he was now encouraged to pursue more innocuous levity through embracing safe modes of leisure and entertainment unburdened by any concern for politics.

2.4 The Second Congress of Soviet Writers and Its Reverberations in North Korea

Following the withdrawal of the Japanese army from Korea in August of 1945, the country was immediately reoccupied by new foreign powers – the United States in the south and the Soviet Union in the north. The Soviet and American forces which helped

liberate the peninsula arrived with their own agendas manifested in competing policies aimed at raising politically loyal forces in their respective areas of control. Much of this effort was accomplished through various cultural programs implemented by the new foreign powers in Korea, including well-funded large-scale projects to disseminate cultural products and promotional materials that would present the new military and civilian administrations in a favorable light to the local population. As a result, foreign literature, film, and art started flooding the liberated Korea on both sides of the dividing 38th parallel.

In 1954, the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang prepared a memorandum “on the publication of newspapers, magazines, and literature in the DPRK.” According to the memo, 522 book and brochure titles were printed in North Korea in 1953 with a total run of 9,227,060 copies compared to only 213 book titles published in 1946 and 487 titles in 1949, registering a steady increase over the years. Even during the Korean War (1950-53) the number of publications continued to climb, marking a fourfold increase in one year alone from 1,185,320 copies in 1951 to 4,621,360 copies in 1952. The diplomatic document listed 15 central and 8 provincial newspapers, as well as 24 magazines published in North Korea in 1954, which was, however, only at half of the 1946 level. The top five publishing companies listed in the embassy memo included Chosŏn rodongdang ch’ulp’ansa (Korean Workers’ Party Publishing Company), Kungnip ch’ulp’ansa (National Publishing Company), Cho-Sso ch’ulp’ansa (Korean-Soviet Publishing Company), Minju ch’ŏnnyŏnsa (Democratic Youth League Publishers), and Chakka tongmaeng ch’ulp’ansa (Writers’ Federation Publishing Company).⁴¹

⁴¹ Yu. A. Mayorov, “Spravka ob izdanii gazet, zhurnalov i lieterury v KNDR na 1 marta 1954 goda” [A memorandum on the publication of newspapers, journals, and literature in the DPRK for March 1, 1954],

Translation of Soviet, Russian, and Western literature accounted for the overwhelming majority of this increased publishing activity in the northern part of the peninsula. Although priority was given, as one would expect, to works of Russian and Soviet literature, both Soviet and Korean publishers occasionally printed works of Western literature, as well. Thus, North Korean readers could find new translations of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and of several of Mark Twain's novels in their bookstores. Among the translations of Russian and Soviet classics, one could encounter the works of Pushkin, Gogol, Ostrovsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Chekhov, Gorky, Fadeev, Mayakovsky, and many others.



Figure 2.1. *Gulliver's Travels* (Pyongyang, 1957)

RGANI, Obshchii ordeal TsK KPSS, 1953-1966 gody, [Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, The General Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1953-1966], iedinita khraneniia №40, list 10-14 (Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 2000).

A close look at the book titles published in North Korea at the time reveals an interesting trend: much of the translated literature, both Russian and Western, fell into the category of satire. Political and social satire was a privileged genre in early Soviet agitprop, which flourished during the more liberal years of the New Economic Policy of the 1920s, but then virtually disappeared in the following decade. While much of the 1920s Soviet satire, regarded as subversive by the new standards of the far less liberal 1930s and 1940s, became denounced and banned, some of it was able to survive in the political maelstrom of Stalin's iron rule and even get canonized.⁴²

The canonization primarily concerned the corpus of classical Russian authors, such as Gogol, Ostrovsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Chekhov, as well as the works of two founding figures in Soviet literature – Maksim Gorky and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Yet, satire makes a comeback again in the 1950s with a redoubled force in the wake of Stalin's death, which marked a new chapter in Soviet history and became a starting-point for undoing much of Stalin's political legacy. The Second All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, which was held in Moscow on December 15-26, 1954 in the wake of these epochal changes, with delegates from 33 foreign countries, including the DPRK, attacked the reigning “theory of no conflict” (*teoriya bezkonfliktnosti*) in Soviet literature and promoted satire with new vigor across the genres.

In his speech delivered on the fourth day of the conference on the state of Soviet dramaturgy, a Soviet playwright Korneichuk announced that the production of satirical

⁴² For example, Anatoly Mariengof's novel *Cynics* (1928) was originally published in Berlin. It was released in the Soviet Union only in 1988 during *perestroika*.

works was “one of the central tasks of Soviet playwrights.”⁴³ While comedies were commonly written for the Soviet stage, their quality was rather unsatisfactory, according to the report, with playwrights often resorting to stock characters and situations. Korneichuk also lamented that for the most part only negative characters in Soviet comedies are endowed with a good sense of humor, while positive heroes often lack in wit and humor altogether, which takes away from their overall attractiveness.

Korneichuk also asked Soviet playwrights to focus more on creating interesting plots, something that had been regarded by many as of secondary importance. The speaker reminded that, after all, theatergoers choose stories over ideas, which can be seen from current popularity ratings. Thus, ideologically weaker works with a great storyline tend to garner more interest from the audience than those that are stronger ideologically, but have less well-developed plots.⁴⁴ The report also identified language as another source of inadequacy in Soviet comedies. With characters speaking the same standardized language employed by authors in all their plays, it is no wonder these characters appear flat, lifeless, and often blur into one. It is impossible to write a good comedy, Korneichuk argued, if the speech of characters is barely individualized and lacks in expressiveness, if it is not studded with jokes, witticisms, and aphorisms.⁴⁵

The main theoretical problem that was waiting to be resolved by the Congress was the issue of representation of negative characters, realities, and situations in socialist realist art. Since satire commonly relies on exaggeration as one of its methods, some

⁴³ *Stenograficheskiĭ otchet: Vtoroi vsesoyuznyi s"ezd sovetskikh pisatelei, 15-26 dekabria 1954 goda* [A stenographic report: second all-union congress of soviet writers, 15-26 December 1954] (Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1956), 186.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

literary critics had raised doubts as to whether satire was even compatible with socialist realist principles, in the first place. The new discourse on satire articulated by the Second Congress of Soviet Writers addressed these very issues in an effort to legitimize the use of satire in Soviet literature, as well as promote it far and wide in Soviet society.

The echo of these debates also reverberated in North Korea. At their core was an attack leveled at the above-mentioned “theory of no conflict” which had emerged first in Soviet philosophical and later in literary theory and practice starting in the mid-1930s.⁴⁶ It may come as little surprise that a theory of this kind would take root during the darkest years of Stalin’s rule. As the Soviet Union was playing modernization catch-up with the West, Soviet leaders were impatient to see quick results everywhere before they had materialized. Therefore, any issues or problems that would attest to the contrary had to be swept under the rug, creating a treacherous appearance of progress and success. This mentality found its expression in Soviet literature and philosophy, as well, in effect, reversing one of the central tenets decreed by the previous Congress, which postulated that dialectical conflicts were to be the bloodline of socialist realism. The newly promoted emphasis on satire was thus conceived as a remedy for this unhealthy situation that would reinstate the principle of Marxist dialectics in its proper place.

In April of 1954, North Korea’s *Chosŏn munhak* journal (“Korean Literature”) reprinted an article by a well-known Soviet literary critic, Ryurikov, which dealt with the question of representation of negative characters in Soviet literature. In his essay, Ryurikov called on Soviet writers to turn to the rich tradition of the 1920s and 1930s Soviet literature of exposing various class enemies in order to stimulate an

⁴⁶ A.A. Surkov, ed. *Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia* [Short literary encyclopedia], vol. 1, (Moskva: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1962-1978), 577.

uncompromising battle against all things negative. Ryurikov held up Fadeev, an important figure in Soviet literature alongside Gorky, Mayakovsky, Sholokhov, and others, as the model of this kind of work from whom the contemporary generation of writers should learn.⁴⁷

The theme of exposure was continued by a chorus of North Korean writers and critics, with the lessons of the Moscow Congress promptly applied to the Korean case. Pyongyang had also adopted the formerly reigning “theory of no conflict” (*mukaldŭngsŏng*) that now came under much fire. Just like their Soviet counterparts, Korean writers would churn out works that glossed over serious problems and misrepresented Korean reality in what later came to be called *mansesik*, or “hooray-style,” literature.⁴⁸ At the same time, those writers who did represent the negative characters and phenomena in their works were harshly criticized for indulging in naturalist tendencies, as their representations allegedly aroused fear of the enemies instead of exciting hatred toward them, as in most of the anti-American literature produced during and in the wake of the Korean War. By doting on the external appearance of brutalities committed by Americans during the war, these authors only scared their readers and helped perpetuate the myth of American invincibility, some critics argued.⁴⁹

However, the biggest problem was the lack of criticism of old beliefs and customs that continued to reign in Korean society thwarting social progress. In particular, the

⁴⁷ Pŭ. Ryurikkobŭ. “Ssoryŏn munhak e issŏsŏ ūi pujŏngjŏk inmul ūi ch’wigŭp e kwanhayŏ” [On the problem of negative characters in Soviet literature], *Chosŏn munhak* 4 (1954): 133-142.

⁴⁸ For instance, most of the works published in a volume entitled *Kŏnsŏl ūi kil* [The road of construction] were now criticized on these very grounds.

⁴⁹ Kim Ha-myŏng, “Pujŏngjŏk inmul ūi hyŏngsanghwa e taehayŏ” [On creating negative characters], *Chosŏn munhak* 9 (1954): 87-94.

private owner mentality was identified as the root cause of most evils, which had not been sufficiently exposed by North Korean writers.⁵⁰ Anticipating the decisions of the December Congress, North Korean critics wrote that the most effective weapon against old forces was the scathing critical laughter of satire. According to socialist realist theory, comical motifs emerged from the contrast between the old and the new. In their battle with progressive forces, old forces associated with everything negative and backward are, of course, doomed to be defeated, and it is from their desperate, last-ditch efforts to survive in the face of the inevitability of progress that the comic is born, North Korean critics reminded.⁵¹

2.5 The Revival of Kim Sakkat's and Pak Yŏn-am's Legacy

Following the official call of the Second Congress to produce “new Gogols and Shchedrins,” North Korea rushed to train its writers in the art of satire. The first step in that direction was to disseminate model literary works that would both fill the void and serve as good examples for Korean writers to learn from – hence the numerous translations of Swift, Twain, Gogol, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Chekhov. Yet, of all the foreign writers translated and published in North Korea at the time, no other author was given as much attention as Vladimir Mayakovsky.

Mayakovsky's poetry was frequently featured in the periodical press, and articles about his place in Soviet and world literature regularly appeared in literary journals and various newspapers. Actively promoted through the efforts of the Korean-Soviet

⁵⁰ Ibid., 92.

⁵¹ Ibid., 101.

Friendship Society, Mayakovsky and his poetry almost became a cult in North Korea. In 1953, the North launched a nationwide campaign to celebrate the poet's 60th anniversary. A national planning committee was organized which was charged with all matters regarding the preparation of celebratory events in every province. The committee was composed of literary workers and various officials who oversaw the publication of a special edition of Mayakovsky's works, organized photo exhibits, public lectures, and symposia introducing Mayakovsky and his work to the broad public.⁵²



Figure 2.2. Mayakovsky's poetry in *Hwa(l)sa*

Special anniversary editions included *Mayakovsky's Life and Work*, *Mayakovsky in Early Soviet Literature*, *Mayakovsky Anthology*, and others. *Cho-Sso munhwa*

⁵² "Mayakkobüşükki t'angaeng 60 chunyön ül kinyöm" [Celebrating Mayakovskii's 60th birthday], *Cho-Sso munhwa*, July 18, 1953, 1.

(“Korean-Soviet Culture”), *Munhak yesul* (“Literary Art”) and other journals featured scholarly articles on Mayakovsky. All radio stations in the country introduced Mayakovsky’s poetry and ran programs about his life and literary career. In Pyongyang alone, over 120 workplaces and schools held lectures, roundtable discussions, and poetry readings to commemorate the great Soviet poet. However, these efforts were not limited to the capital alone, and, according to the press reports, every town, province, and district held lectures, roundtables, readings, and parties at workplaces, schools, and farm collectives to celebrate this date. Photo exhibits, both permanent and traveling, which disseminated numerous colorful posters, photographs, and other artwork about Mayakovsky in various locations throughout the country, reportedly drew large crowds.⁵³

While Mayakovsky was remembered as a patriotic poet who glorified the revolution and innovated the poetic form, he was first and foremost upheld as the writer of sharp social and political satire. One of the critics writing on Mayakovsky in the country’s leading literary journal pointed out that despite the fact that scholarship on the great Soviet poet was growing rapidly each year, there were still no studies even in the Soviet Union on Mayakovsky’s satire. Yet, the writer was widely acclaimed as the great Soviet satirist who continued the tradition of Saltykov-Shchedrin and Gorky, and it was as a writer of brilliant contemporary satire that he came to be known among the North Korean public.⁵⁴

Thanks to the special nationwide campaign in celebration of the writer’s 60th birthday, Mayakovsky became a household name in North Korea, perhaps, better known

⁵³ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁴ Sök Yŏng, “Urajimil Mayakkobŭssŭkki ūi ch’angjak e taehan Makssŭjuŭijŏk haesŏk ūl wihayŏ” [Toward a Marxist analysis of Vladimir Mayakovskii’s work], *Chosŏn munhak* 4 (1953): 120-130.

to the average North Korean at the time than any other Soviet author. Mayakovsky's pictures were everywhere, newspapers and magazines constantly wrote something on his life and work, while his poetry was broadcasted on the radio and recited at poetry readings all over the country.⁵⁵

As we can see, the new cultural policy that emerged out of the Second Congress of Soviet Writers had a profound impact on the North Korean literary and cultural landscape. This impact was not limited to simply inundating Moscow's Far Eastern satellite with Soviet and Western satire, but extended to stimulating Koreans' interest in their own rich literary heritage, as well. As a result of this new orientation, Pyongyang was forced to look back at its past in an attempt to identify its own "Gogols and Shschedrins" and further build on that tradition. It was at that historical moment that the North Korean literary establishment began to popularize the legacy of two major figures of the Chosŏn period – an itinerant poet Kim Sakkat and a renowned Korean polymath Pak Yŏn-am – both of whom were well-known for their social and political satire.

Although most of Kim Sakkat's satirical poems had originally been written down in Chinese characters, rather than in the native Korean alphabet, they were newly published in 1956 using only the phonetic script with a circulation of 20,000 copies (Figure 2.3). With glosses and commentary added to the text, Sakkat's satire was now made accessible to anyone who was literate.⁵⁶ Around the same time, North Korea's celebrated playwright, Song Yŏng, wrote a play about Kim Sakkat.⁵⁷ It is also noteworthy

⁵⁵ "Mayakkobūsŭkki t'angsaeng," 1.

⁵⁶ Ri, Ŭng-su, trans., *P'ungja siin Kim Sakkat* [Satirical poet Kim Sakkat] (Kungnip ch'ulp'ansa, 1956).

⁵⁷ *Hyŏndae Chosŏn munhak sŏnjip (Hŭigokchip)* [Collection of modern Korean literature (Plays)], (P'yŏngyang: Chosŏn chakka tongmaeng ch'ulp'ansa, 1958), 191-229.

that after the Liberation, Song worked as the head of the publishing company for the Korean-Soviet Cultural Society (*Cho-Sso munhwa hyŏphoe*) and was, probably, involved firsthand in various Soviet projects of translating Western satirical literature into Korean.⁵⁸



Figure 2.3. *Satirical Poet Kim Sakkat* (Pyongyang, 1956)

Another important cultural icon remembered in postwar North Korea was Pak Chi-wŏn, better known by his literary name of Yŏn-am. In 1956, the country celebrated a 150th anniversary since the writer's death, and, as one would expect, used this as an opportunity to promote his legacy far and wide. Articles on the life and work of the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 132.

renowned Chosŏn writer appeared both in the mainstream press and specialized publications, and studies were commissioned to the academy. Yŏn-am was touted as not only a great national figure, but also as a classical literary genius of world stature whose work had been getting international attention. A contemporary study on Pak Yŏn-am by Kim Ha-myŏng, widely known and well-received in North Korea, authoritatively stated that satirical elements formed the very kernel of Yŏn-am's literary work.⁵⁹

Along with Kim Sakkat, Pak was widely promoted as one of the forebears of the satirical tradition in Korean literature. A famous contemporary North Korean writer Han Sŏrya highly praised the “immortal satirical characters” Pak had left behind, such as Mr. Puk-kwak, calling him one of the great Korean writers who had inherited and further developed the tradition of satire and humor in early Korean literature, which had opened new beginnings in the development of Korean satire.⁶⁰

Apparently, North Korean cultural authorities decided to seize this opportunity to join the world ensemble of renowned Western writers best known for their satire and place their very own Kim Sakkat and Pak Yŏn-am on the same pedestal with Gogol, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Chekhov, Twain, Swift, Cervantes, and many others. In fact, North Korea was actively constructing a new tradition, a lineage going back to Ancient Greece, which would afford Koreans a proud place within it. This, of course, was not without Soviet help, since the lineage had already been put in place and the canon had been

⁵⁹ Sin Ku-hyŏn, “‘Yŏn-am Pak Chi-wŏn’ e taehayŏ” [About Yŏn-am Pak Chi-wŏn], *Chosŏn munhak* 1 (1956): 177-183.

⁶⁰ Han Sŏl-ya, “Yŏn-am Pak Chi-wŏn ūi saengae wa hwal'tong” [Yŏn-am Pak Chi-wŏn's Life and Work], *Chosŏn munhak* 1 (1956): 137-156.

firmly established. It is into this canon that North Korea tried to inscribe itself through the efforts to promote Kim Sakkat and Pak Yŏn-am during the 1950s.

It is then neither surprising, nor accidental that the North Korean press would regularly write about such figures, as Aristophanes and Cervantes.⁶¹ For example, in the 1950s and early 1960s, both *Chosŏn munhak* and *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* published a number of articles on Cervantes and Don Quixote.⁶² Again, this was not without the input of the Soviet Union. The commemoration of world literary heritage was one of the many efforts carefully planned by the so-called World Peace Council, an international organization founded in 1950 and backed by the USSR. It was through the WPC that North Korea would join the ranks of “progressive” nations in celebrating the legacy of world-renowned writers. As part of the yearlong celebratory events, member countries would promote the work of certain literary figures at home through special coverage in the national press, commissioning of new translations and anniversary editions, reading events, academic conferences, and other publicity efforts.

2.6. Consumption of Foreign Literature in North Korea

Pyongyang was part of this larger international endeavor, although falling far behind when it came to producing translations of foreign literature. While the newly adopted canon was touted far and wide, the North Korean reader could often only read *about* these classics of world literature without having access to the actual texts. One critic lamented that the works of Shakespeare, Dickens, Balzac, Hugo, London, and many

⁶¹ Sŏ Man-il, “Arisŭttohwanesŭ ŭi hŭigŭk” [Aristophanes’ Comedy], *Chosŏn munhak* 12 (1954): 118-127.

⁶² Han Sŏl-ya, “Tong K’ihot’e’ e taehayŏ: kŭ ch’op’an palhaeng 350 chunyŏng kinyŏm pogo esŏ” [About Don Quixote: Celebrating 350 years since first edition], *Chosŏn munhak* 4 (1955): 192-199.

others were still not available in Korean translation, pointing out that readers were not just waiting for new books *on* these writers, but translations of their actual works. And while the North celebrated the work of Aristophanes, Cervantes, Whitman, Ibsen, Dostoyevsky, Heine, and others in accordance with the WPC directives, many of the classical Western writers remained to be out of reach for an average North Korean reader.⁶³

As I already mentioned, priority was given to translating and publishing Russian and Soviet classics, but even in that area things did not always go smoothly. There were numerous cases when translations of foreign literature would come out in parts over a period of several years. For example, part one of Erengurg's *Burya* ("The Tempest") came out before the Korean War, part two was published in 1955, while part three was still pending in 1956. There were still many works that readers could not read to the end, because they had not been published in their entirety.⁶⁴

Another pressing issue was a rather poor quality of the majority of translations. Critics complained that excellent works of foreign literature were made extremely "boring" (*ttabunhada*) at the hands of incompetent translators. That was why, some argued, many readers expressed only tepid interest in Fadeev's *Molodaya Gvardia* ("The Young Guard") and Zegers' *Sedmoy Krest* ("The Seventh Cross"), two acclaimed Soviet novels which had been made available in Korean translation.⁶⁵

⁶³ Pak Yŏng-gŭn, "Oeguk munhak ŭi pŏnyŏk ch'ulp'an saŏp kaesŏn ŭl wihayŏ" [On improving translation of foreign literature], *Chosŏn munhak* 9 (1956): 34.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 36.

The lack of accessible “commentary” (*haesŏl*) and “analysis” (*punsŏk*) accompanying these translations rendered many foreign works of literature available in North Korea during the 1950s difficult to relate to for the Korean reader. This was especially true in the case of premodern writers, such as Pushkin and Lermontov who lived in the early 19th century Russia. Thus, Pushkin’s complete works published in Korean came only with a brief translator’s foreword, while Chekhov’s complete writings came with no foreword or any commentary whatever.⁶⁶ Other critics complained that translated foreign literature often made little or no sense to the Korean reader due to poorly done translations from Russian and other languages.⁶⁷

These testimonies are quite telling of how Korean readers consumed foreign and, in particular, Soviet and Russian literature during the 1950s. What becomes clear from these accounts is an apparent lack of engagement with these “serious” literary classics on part of North Korean readers, at least, in the manner the state expected them to internalize these canonical texts. Instead, we see a new practice of *fragmentary consumption* emerge, with Koreans reading translated foreign literature in fits and starts following the vicissitudes of the country’s publishing industry, often without even finishing them to the end. The language of many translations would be either too difficult or have an indelible stamp of foreignness on it, rendering the literature in question boring, strange, and inadvertently funny at the same time.

Whatever the approach adopted by an individual reader, it seems to have remained a far cry from the hopes of North Korea’s cultural engineers. It is no wonder,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 38

⁶⁷ Kang P’il-ju, “Pŏnyŏk munhak e taehan sugi” [Memoirs on translating literature], *Chosŏn munhak* 12 (1956): 151.

then, that such best-selling Soviet novels as Fadeev's *Molodaya Gvardiya* ("The Young Guard") would collect dust on the shelves of the country's bookstores and public libraries for many years.⁶⁸ The flood of infelicitous translations unwittingly transformed these foreign texts, some of them not humorous or satirical at all, from serious into ludicrous and from deliberately somber into inadvertently comical, thereby turning Western and Soviet classics at times into local literary garbage. A more playful individual would find an unexpected source of hilarity in the linguistic slippages and mishaps in reading these poorly translated works, as we would today watching a foreign movie with especially poor subtitles, while most others would simply toss the bad book aside never to come back to it again.

2.7 The Issue of Appeal

While both foreign and Korean classics played an important role in promoting satire, it was only part of a larger effort to raise a new generation of contemporary satirists – the latter-day "Gogols and Shchedrins." Since satire was viewed as indispensable in helping eradicate any vestiges of old beliefs and customs, a modern army of satirists had to be promptly trained and deployed to accomplish this task. Yet, given the prevailing bias toward satire among contemporary North Korean writers who continued to regard it in traditional terms as a "low" and "vulgar" form of literature, few volunteered to join the ranks. Therefore, in order to implement the new policy the state had to find a way to coax unenthusiastic writers into doing its bidding.

⁶⁸ Pak, "Oeguk munhak," 38.

The way chosen by the state to introduce satirical elements into contemporary Korean literature was through a new literary genre of *otcherk*, actively promoted by critics and literary officials around this time. Essentially an essay form, *otcherk* shared much in common with the tradition of political pamphlets and feuilletons, which had been widely used by Russian opposition leaders, political activists, and revolutionaries of all stripes in the early 20th century. Known by its Russian name in Korean, *otcherk* was a hybrid style mixing journalistic reportage with fictional storytelling. *Otcherk* gained popularity in the Soviet Union during the war and remained in vogue through the postwar decade. While *otcherk* was free to borrow from any other modes and genres of writing and could vary in tone from exalted to humorous, it tended to favor more often than not a satirical mode of presentation.

As a result, the overwhelming majority of contemporary literary satire in North Korea assumed the form of an *otcherk*. The country's leading literary journal, *Chosŏn munhak*, helped introduce the work of Erenburg, Sholokhov, Leonov, and other Soviet *otcherkists* to North Korean literary circles and the public at large. Since *otcherk* was a new genre for North Korean literature lacking a well-developed theoretical foundation, North Korean writers were expected to master the form through emulating model works of Soviet authors.

As one article explained, at the heart of any *otcherk* is an event on which the writer must provide his or her commentary and opinion, while making certain that the audience is entertained by the story and influenced by the underlying political message at the same time. In order to achieve that, an *otcherk* must have an "appeal" (*hŭngmi*), that is, it must elicit interest from the reader, whether it is on the basis of the plot, character

portrayal, or style. Practically speaking, appeal usually meant that the writer had an obligation to spice up his work with some element of the comic.⁶⁹

This strategy seems to have paid off, as in a matter of just a few years one writer remarked that, “recently this unfamiliar to us genre has developed a great deal.”⁷⁰ Yet, the same author criticized North Korean *otcherkists* for placing too much stress on “facts” (*sasil*) in their writing, leading to a “documentalist tendency” (*kirokchuijŏk kyŏnghyang*). He, furthermore, pointed out that the use of comic techniques in most *otcherks* was rather superficial and caused no more than “light laughter” (*kabyŏun usŭm*) among the audience, leaving the reader unaffected on a deeper level.⁷¹ Another critic reminded that the most important aspect of this genre was its “critical spirit” (*pip’anjŏk ppap’ossŭ*), which often became forfeited by North Korean *otcherkists* who focused too much on facts and details and tended to avoid direct criticism.⁷²

It was precisely this problem that critics tried to address through a flurry of articles which instructed fledgling North Korean satirists in the art of *otcherk* writing. The situation with uncritical *otcherks* and the “light laughter” they produced, in fact, encapsulates the very dilemma faced by North Korean writers. On the one hand, they had to write in a style they were not very familiar with, which many of them also continued to view as secondary and unimportant in relation to their true literary aspirations, given the elitist views on literature still harbored by many North Korean writers at the time. On the

⁶⁹ Ri Hyo-un, “Munhak changnŭ o-ch’erŭkkŭ e kwanhayŏ: ch’angjak pang’pŏp ŭl chungsim ŭro” [On the literary genre of *otcherk*: focusing on the creative method], *Chosŏn munhak* 12 (1952): 126-141.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷² Kang Nŭng-su, “Och’erŭk’ŭ munhak esŏ chegitoenŭn myŏt kaji munje” [A few questions raised by *otcherk* literature], *Chosŏn munhak* 6 (1958): 135-144.

other hand, engaging in direct criticism of real, rather than fictional events and people, while amusing many at the expense of the few, was fraught with all sorts of consequences that could put one's career (and possibly life) on the line.

In sum, North Korean writers found it difficult to strike a balance between fact and fiction and keep their stories deeply critical and genuinely entertaining at the same time. Even after six years, most *otcherks* were still more dry fact than fiction and only superficially funny at best. In 1957, one writer lamented in his speech at the Second National Journalists' Congress that it still "feels that we have too little humor and satire in our newspapers and magazines."⁷³ Another critic writing about the situation with theater complained that although many new plays had been produced in recent years, hardly any of them were able capture the interest of the audience – it became all too common to see patrons leave theater in the middle of the show.⁷⁴

2.8 Visual Satire in *Hwa(l)sal*

But if homegrown literary satire did not take off as the authorities would have wanted, visual satire, on the other hand, disseminated through cartoons and posters was far more successful in casting a wide net over the entire country. The immediate impact of visual images was especially effective in a society with still relatively low literacy levels. Furthermore, public display of satirical images accompanied by pithy captions

⁷³ Pak P'al-yang, "Swiun mallo, kŭrigo chom tŏ hŭngmi ikke" [Simpler words and more fun], *Che2ch'a chŏnguk kija taehoe chuyo munhŏnjip* [Collection of important documents from the 2nd national congress of journalists] (Chosŏn kija tongmaeng chungang wiwŏnhoe, June 1967): 154.

⁷⁴ Pak T'ae-yŏng, "Hŭigok ŭi hŭngmi e taehayŏ" [About appeal in plays], *Chosŏn munhak* 5 (1955): 164-165.

made it easy to create shared terms of reference and a common ludic space. One of such sources of visual satire was the nation's only specialized satirical journal *Hwa(l)sal* ("Arrow"), cartoons from which were frequently reprinted in other publications across the country during the 1950s.⁷⁵ Modeled on a Soviet satirical journal, *Krokodil* ("Crocodile"), the North Korean magazine, continuously published for over a decade, featured numerous reprints from its Soviet counterpart, especially in its early days.

The journal described itself as the "republic's only satirical cartoon magazine." The publication started in August of 1946 under the name of *Horang'i* ("Tiger"). In January of 1948, the magazine changed its name to *Hwa(l)sal* ("Arrow").⁷⁶ *Hwa(l)sal*, however, was not the only avenue of bringing satire to the masses. For instance, *Cho-Sso ch'insŏn* ("Korean-Soviet Friendship"), an organ of the Korean-Soviet Friendship Society, had featured cartoons and funny stories for years under its regular "Satire & Humor" rubric. Naturally, the materials published in *Cho-Sso ch'insŏn* were reprints from Soviet periodicals, such as *Krokodil*, *Krestianka*, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, *Ogonyok*, and others. All cartoons featured by the North Korean periodical press were either social satire making fun of old beliefs and customs or political satire on South Korea and the United States.

Hwa(l)sal along with other periodicals that regularly featured humor and satire on their pages played a crucial role in the formation of a satirical outlook among their readers by virtue of giving the quotidian a deliberately comical twist. When we examine these publications, we encounter frequent representations of contemporary daily life in North Korea. While it was not uncommon to see idealized images of North Korean

⁷⁶ The name *Hwalsal* was later changed to *Hwasal* without change in meaning, hence my choice of spelling as *Hwa(l)sal* to reflect that.

society every now and then, it was mostly social satire exposing the shortcomings and vestiges of old mentality and practices among North Korean people.

So, what happens when a cartoonist takes some unsightly aspect of our everyday life and turns it into something comical? Alenka Zupančič argues that what is at stake in the difference between “tragic” and “comic” perspectives on life is not simply two ways of looking at the same configuration, one pessimistic and the other one optimistic. It is, rather, that comedy is always inaugurated by some “unexpected surplus-realization.” She further elaborates on this idea:

This surplus-realization may well be produced by failure, by a mistake, an error, through misunderstanding (and usually it is), but the moment it occurs it changes the very structure of the field. The field of comedy is essentially a field in which the answer precedes the question, satisfaction precedes the demand. Not only do we (or the comic characters) not get what we asked for, *on top of it* (and not instead of it) we get something we haven’t asked for at all. And we have to cope with this surprising surplus, respond to it (this is the imperative of the genre). It is this discrepancy of something *en plus* that leads the way and drives the comedy. ... The discrepancy at stake could also be formulated in topological instead of temporal terms: the satisfaction is produced somewhere else than where we expect it or await it.⁷⁷

It is precisely the insertion of this “surplus-satisfaction” that transforms the familiar and the mundane into something new and unexpectedly satisfying. In cartoon representations, the cartoonist takes the trivial and turns it into something funny through the use of such artistic methods as simplification and exaggeration. In addition, the distance made possible by representation allows the subjects to see comedy now in commonplace events. More importantly, satirized representations of the everyday turn

⁷⁷ Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 132.

mundane *events* into comical *stories*. It could be argued that repeated exposure to such representations of the everyday trains the reader of these images to recognize the comic in the mundane when the reader is confronted with it again in real life.

2.9 Satirical Production for *Pyŏkpo*

While the purpose of these representations was admittedly to make people laugh at themselves and through this corrective laughter rectify their ways, we cannot know with certainty whether this goal was ever achieved. In the very least, I would argue, visual satire contributed to bringing play into the public realm and further encouraged, if unwittingly, the practice of street jesting. One of the ways *Hwa(l)sal* was able to accomplish that was through continuous efforts to draw their readers into the process of satirizing contemporary everyday life.

The journal solicited contributions of all kinds from its readers, including criticism (*pip'anmun*), cartoons (*manhwa*), as well as any material on individuals or events that needed to be exposed and criticized, which the editorial board could use in the production of satire. In other words, *Hwa(l)sal* did not merely package the everyday as funny and expect its readers to passively consume those representations, but actually invited them to become active participants in the very act of turning the everyday into satire. This, of course, involved not only the ability to identify events and personalities from everyday life that would work well as satire, but also required the necessary skills to produce such representations.

In its pursuit of higher production levels across industries, the state mandated factories and farms to actively involve the working masses in workplace political education and propaganda programs. Specifically, workers and farmers were asked to publicize any instances of workplace negligence and mistakes through their locally produced newspapers and wall gazettes (*pyŏkpo*). Wall gazettes had been already commonly used in the Soviet Union for years, where they were called *stengazeta* – an abbreviation of *stennaya gazeta*, or “wall newspaper” – and from which the Korean counterpart *pyŏkpo* is derived. *Stengazetas* were essentially communally produced posters that were usually affixed to interior or exterior walls, featuring local and national news, official announcements, short articles, interviews, entertainment content, as well as pictures, photographs, and cartoons.

In order to equip its readers with the skills necessary for the production of *pyŏkpo*, *Hwa(l)sal* ran a series of articles in the 1950s instructing how to make effective cartoons for workplace wall gazettes (Figure 2.4). The journal introduced its readers to various cartoon production tricks, such as an effective use of coloring techniques and detail, which could be easily employed by anyone to create quality materials for workplace newspapers and wall gazettes. *Pyŏkpo* also widely used cartoons printed in *Hwa(l)sal* and other periodicals in addition to creating original work. In short, the satirical journal both recorded the comical episodes from everyday life on its pages and promoted a playful sensibility among its readers through getting them involved in the satire production process itself.



Figure 2.4. Guidelines on cartoon design in *Hwa(l)sal*

2.10 The Street as the Playground

However, these efforts did not always yield desired results, as the social satire would often play into the hands of street jesters, making them the new heroes of popular cartoons. But, first, a few words are in order about the street jesters and what it is that they did on the streets. The 1950s street culture was a product of the social perturbations that engulfed North Korea in the post-Liberation period, as well as the social displacements experienced by the people during the Korean War. The new postwar reality is, perhaps, best characterized by the word that became too common throughout the 1950s and that can be encountered across a variety of writings from the period – *mujilsŏ* (“disorder” or “chaos”). The social disorder was a result of low literacy of the population, breakdown of traditional social bonds when peasants began to migrate into larger cities from the countryside, and a lack of urban infrastructure to direct the energies of people at leisure into organized cultural activities. To put it simply, the masses had to

entertain themselves the best way they could and to do so in the midst of dire postwar poverty and only rudimentary entertainment options provided by the state.

Street play would ordinarily happen in public spaces, such as bus stops and trains, riverbanks and water pumps, parks and playgrounds. These were busy public sites with enough room for improvisation and enough audience for potential jesters to play their pranks. For a while, *Hwa(l)sal* ran a special section called *Rogŭmsil* (“Recording studio”) in almost every issue, documenting instances of disorderly public behavior in the form of satire. The stories often even identified specific places where reported incidents had occurred, belying the state’s panoptic gaze extending into the public realm.

One report humorously records a “new type of handshake” that has become popular among rush-hour commuters, when a person would “recognize” a certain “Park” or “Kim” standing at the front of the line and proceed to greet and shake hands with the newly discovered acquaintance. This, in turn, would provoke others waiting in line to follow suit, causing a line to turn into a chaotic crowd of people fighting their way to get on the bus (Figure 2.5).

Another comic sketch tells of a farmer from the countryside trying to catch a bus bound for Pyongyang who is confounded by a sight of people trickling inside the bus with closed doors parked in the depot and clearly not in service. A fellow passenger explains that only those who are on friendly terms with the bus driver get “priority” boarding before everyone else tries to get on the bus. In yet another piece, an onlooker mistakes a line to get into Pyongyang’s famous Taedongmun movie theater with a street scuffle. A passerby cynically comments that, apparently, one has to enter the theater in this rowdy manner to truly enjoy the show.



Figure 2.5. “Public chaos” at a North Korean bus stop

Instances of social disorder turned into satire covered a wide range of mischievous activities of which we find numerous reports on the pages of *Hwa(l)sal* as well as other periodicals. The most common of them included attempts to get on public transportation without paying fare, various pretenses that would get one into a movie theater without having to buy a ticket, street games that often resulted in damage to public and private property, scuffles, brawls, arguments, and so on. This disorderly behavior encompassed instances of both deliberate mischief and forced survival tactics, while the agents of these acts could be either self-conscious jesters or “innocent” public inadvertently drawn into an impromptu incident.

2.11 Conclusion

As the Soviet state was going through the process of de-Stalinization at home and trying to implement the same policies abroad in its satellite countries, it brought the public in close contact with a rich body of satire, both contemporary and classic. The impact of this campaign on the North Korean society at large was profound as much as it was unexpected in its outcome. A call for an all-out satirical offensive was not too enthusiastically embraced by professional writers, but found a welcome audience with ordinary people who were also invited to contribute and participate in the nationwide process of satirizing their fellows. The working masses took to the new fad of self-made satire, finding in it the justification for their own tricks and pranks, much to the chagrin of cultural officials, as their productions quickly began to take them outside the boundaries set by the new policy. As a result, we see an explosion of street play, with the street emerging as a site of play in the absence of a well-developed infrastructure of leisure and entertainment.

The nation's only satirical journal, *Hwa(l)sal*, played a key role in bringing into a sharp focus this street culture of pranks and mischief, effectively turning street play into social satire. The cartoon representations appearing on the pages of *Hwa(l)sal* rendered mundane events self-reflexively comical by dint of packaging them as self-contained comic narratives. These representations highlighted the performative dimension of street jesting, instilling in its participants an awareness that they are putting on a show for others.

While the goal was admittedly to reinstate public decorum with the help of corrective laughter, these representations also sharpened public awareness of familiar everyday occurrences as inherently comic in addition to helping reinforce the jesters' pleasure in their own exhibitionism. The images provided visual narratives that helped organize the trivial and the mundane into consumable stories which could now generate what Alenka Zupančič has called “surplus-satisfaction.”

The state-employed satirists and cartoonists worked hard to help eradicate “backwardness” in people’s everyday life through their relentless derision of old beliefs and customs still prevalent in society. We must bear in mind, however, that, at least in part, this “backwardness” was as much a result of the inadequate material conditions created by the Korean War as it was a result of the tenacity of old ideas and practices. Put differently, the “backwardness” was inseparable from the economic depression the country had sunk into after the war and was not simply a matter of an uninformed choice. While the state was calling on the individual to reform his ways, it often did so on pure enthusiasm alone without providing the means that would enable an ordinary person to make this turnaround.

Perhaps, what we could call a paradigmatic representation of social disorder as street play can be found in a cartoon entitled *Irōhan hyōnsang ūl...* (“This state of affairs...”) (Figure 2.6). This cartoon shows a busy public space, where the street functions simultaneously as a marketplace, a playground, a dump, a road, a kitchen garden, and a living space. While not every street in North Korea was exactly like the one depicted in the cartoon, this satirized image does make an important point about the street, suggesting in concrete visual terms that it could be any or all of the above all at once. The

street figures prominently in numerous cartoons published during this time in North Korea as the locus of the unseemly, the unsightly, and the errant in the contemporary city.

The second part of this cartoon (Figure 2.7) bearing the caption of *Ch'allanhan munhwa tosi ro!* ("Into a shining cultural city!") delivers an urgent call to transform the current mess and chaos of urban living into an orderly, clean, and well-organized modern space. What is remarkable about this second image is that the establishment of urban order shown here is accompanied by a complete removal of play from the street and any trace of humor from the representation. Thus, the ideal city is envisioned as a place where the play is taken out of the street to be situated in special spaces designated for public leisure.

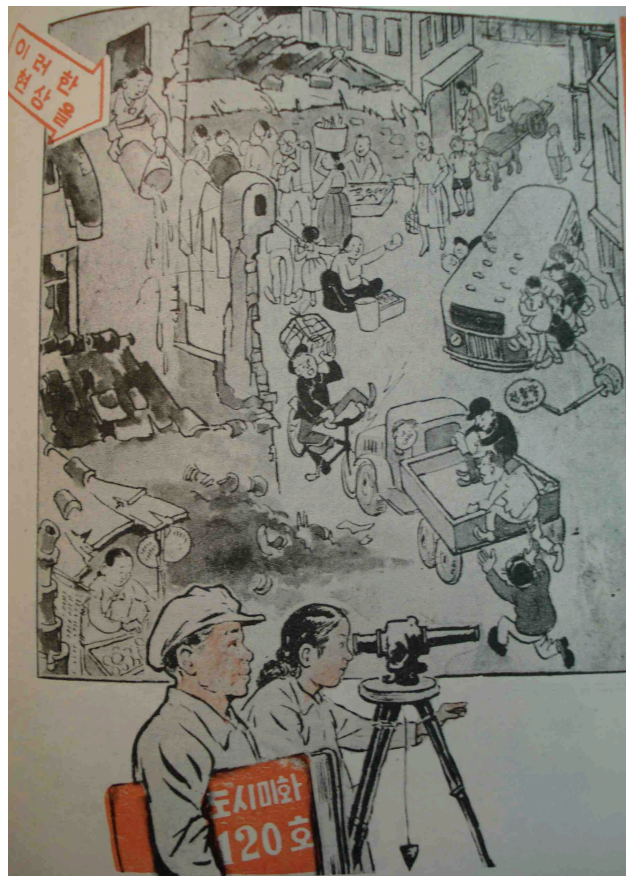


Figure 2.6. A typical North Korean street in the 1950s

While this particular cartoon does not actually show us these alternate sites of communal leisure, another image, which presents construction plans for the city of Pyongyang, proudly displays them in vibrant colors (Figure 2.8).



Figure 2.7. Imagining urban harmony

The picture gives us a bird's-eye-view of a future North Korean capital, showing Pyongyang as a cultural center of a new urbanity, a well-planned modern city with an excellent infrastructure of cultural and leisure facilities, including a community center for children and youth, a department store, a playhouse, a circus, a waterfront park, a

fountain, a hotel, as well as various museums and monuments. Interestingly, what is altogether missing in this image is the spontaneous disorderly play on the streets we see in the other representation – something that apparently had no place in official visions of a new Pyongyang. While we do see people on the street, they no longer inhabit this space as their playground. Instead, they appear here as disciplined citizens moving purposefully through a maze of imposing structures – the new houses of play and leisure erected by the state.

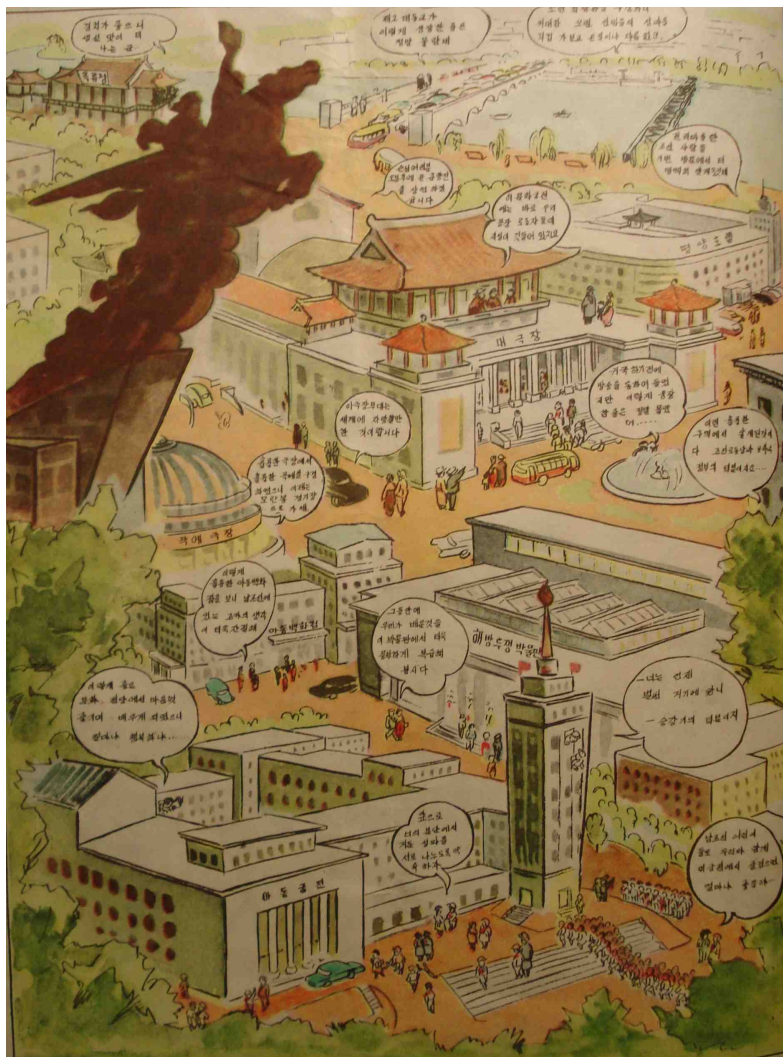


Figure 2.8. Plans for a new leisure infrastructure for Pyongyang

3. The Struggle for Attractions: The Cinema of Fits and Starts and the Chameleon Spectator

3.1 Introduction

In March of 1961, the North Korean press was busy trumpeting the most recent success of the nation's film industry – the release of the first color widescreen feature, *Our Glorious Fatherland* (*Yŏng'gwangsŭrŏun uri choguk*). The recipient of the People's Prize and the pride of the domestic technological revolution, the film was showing at Pyongyang's new widescreen Sŏn'gyo Cinema. The theater itself was an architectural and technological marvel. Featuring a spacious lobby 2,100 sq. feet in area decorated with a massive glass chandelier and marble floors and housing several small shops, a café, a photo gallery, and an ongoing art exhibit, Sŏn'gyo Cinema could comfortably seat over 800 people before a 15 x 6 meter wide screen (2.5:1 image ratio). As the capital's flagship widescreen theater, it was fully equipped with the state-of-the-art sound and projection systems.⁷⁸

Pyongyang had been keeping abreast of latest international developments in widescreen film technology since, at least, the late 1950s. On February 7, 1958, the Standing Committee of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee announced its decision to begin preparations for the development of widescreen processes at home. Apart from certain constructional changes that had to be made to theaters in order to accommodate a greater size screen, the introduction of widescreen format also required to address a number of theoretical and technical issues related to optical lens and

⁷⁸ “Kwangp'ok yŏnghwagwan ŭl ch'ajasŏ” [A visit to a widescreen theater], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 3 (1961): 22.

stereoscopic sound technology. Adoption of widescreen cinema would not have been possible without prior advances in the fields of optical electricity, precision instruments, chemistry, magnetic sound recording, acoustics, and a number of other key areas. In 1959, the state film studio had already claimed success in producing its first color motion picture. By the end of the decade, the North was making its own film equipment, including automatic developing machines, movie cameras, projectors, amplifiers, and sound recorders, and was also conducting research into animation processes.⁷⁹

While US-based companies were developing competing, and often incompatible, widescreen technologies throughout the 1950s, such as Cinerama, CinemaScope, Todd-AO, Vistavision, Cinemiracle, Technirama, and Panavision,⁸⁰ socialist countries led by the Soviet Union were seeking to adopt one single widescreen process for all its member states. Thus, in 1958, a Congress of Film Workers of Socialist Countries held in Romania passed a resolution to develop widescreen processes based on the anamorphic lens technology. This method was reckoned to be both technically and economically the most rational of all available widescreen technologies at the time, as it required minimal constructional changes to existing film equipment and exhibition venues.⁸¹ Also becoming increasingly popular in the United States through the success of CinemaScope developed at Twentieth Century – Fox, the anamorphic-based widescreen process seemed

⁷⁹ Pok Sŏng-gyu, “Kwangp’ok yŏnghwa rŭl uri nara e toipharm e issŏsŏ chegitoenŭn myŏtkaji munje” [A few problems regarding the introduction of widescreen films in our country], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 9 (1959): 26-29.

⁸⁰ For more on the development of widescreen processes in the US, see: John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁸¹ Pok, “Kwangp’ok yŏnghwa,” 28. (Interestingly, while North Korean sources contain a report on the Romanian congress, no mention of the meeting is found in the main Soviet film journal *Iskusstvo Kino*.)

to emerge as the new industry norm on both sides of the Iron Curtain.⁸² The new Sŏn'gyo Cinema was using this CinemaScope-type format, offering its public an experience on a par with the world's best cinemas in the United States and the Soviet Union.

However, despite the widely advertised industry success, Sŏn'gyo Cinema was by no means representative of the experience of an average moviegoer at the time. In fact, not only were most theaters in North Korea yet to be converted to widescreen, they were still struggling to resolve far more basic issues related to film exhibition. In that respect, adoption of widescreen technology should be understood within the context of the industry's search for new attractions. But, unlike in the case of the United States, where widescreen cinema was seen as a means to bring audiences back to the theater, as the industry was losing them to other forms of entertainment, including television which became widely popular during the postwar decade, North Korea, conversely, needed new legitimate attractions in order to put an end to the existing forms of spectatorship which fed on the technical failures of the cinematic apparatus.

3.2 “Office Flicks” and the Captive Audience

It is a common mistake to assume the existence of a compliant spectator in socialist countries. While it is generally true that socialist cinemas address the working class as a whole as their primary audience, it does not at all mean that there is no differentiation, in the very least, along age and gender lines, as far as film production is concerned. But, regardless of how the industry may choose to see its audience at any

⁸² Song Ik-su, “Kwangp'ok yŏnghwagwan sisŏl e taehan myŏt kaji munje” [Some issues regarding the equipment of widescreen theaters], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 10 (1960): 28-29.

given time, its inevitably reductive view must never be a substitute for the actual complexity of the film-viewing public. Nor should official expectations of the film's impact on the audience be ever accepted in place of a carefully studied audience response.

Unfortunately, the majority of existing analyses of North Korean films take their apparent ideological excess at its face value, as if their native viewers were merely soulless machines programmed to read these texts precisely the way they were intended to by their producers and distributors. Nothing could be farther away from the truth. As this chapter will demonstrate, even outwardly conformist consumption of audio-visual propaganda does not necessarily translate into internally compliant assimilation of its political content. While concrete models of film spectatorship will vary depending on specific historical circumstances, the particular context I will be looking at here presents an extreme case of complete semantic transformation of a filmic text in the hands of a playful spectator.

It must be noted from the outset that there were, in fact, two contrasting models of film spectatorship found in North Korea during the period in question. One of them was associated with workplace cinemas, while the other one was identified with urban (and to a lesser extent rural) picture-houses. Both models, which will be discussed in this chapter, exemplify the notion of spectatorship as public performance, although in rather different ways. I will start my discussion with what could be called a conformist model of spectatorship related to a specific mode of film exhibition associated with workplace movie theaters, before I introduce its critical counterpart corresponding to the forms of film consumption characteristic of what we can refer to as the neighborhood cinema.⁸³

⁸³ Miriam Hansen produced a seminal study of early American film spectatorship, in which she traces the origins of an alternative public sphere to the transformations in US film exhibition practices and the

In early 1958, North Korea had reportedly 80 workplace movie theaters and over 80 mobile projection units affiliated with various state enterprises where most of the country's population was employed. Workplace cinemas accounted for a daily average turnout of more than 86,000 workers nationwide.⁸⁴ In less than two years, the number of worksite theaters reached 222, which, together with 306 mobile projection units and over 720 stationary theaters recorded that year, marked a twelvefold increase compared to 1946. In total, some 380,000 people on average were said to see films in North Korea daily.⁸⁵ In other words, as the number of exhibitors continued to climb up, almost every major factory and mine in the country, no matter how remote, was connected to the national film distribution network. It would be safe to say that if you were living in North Korea at the time and could not make it to the movies, the movies would most likely come to you.

Strikingly, despite the convenience of having a movie theater at work, most workplace cinemas experienced serious problems with attendance, while non-workplace theaters, by contrast, faced an opposite problem of overcrowding. Why would North Korean workers shun free film screenings organized for them at work and rush to their neighborhood movie theaters, instead, once their workday was over is an intriguing question an answer to which can help us better understand the nature of North Korean spectatorship at the time.

emergence of audiences as an active participant of the cinematic process within the context of the urban movie theater. For more parallels between Hansen's study and the North Korean case, see the first three chapters (pp. 21-125) of her book: Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁸⁴ Kim Han-gyu, "Rodong kyegŭp sok e yŏnghwa yesul ūl kip'i ch'imt'usik'ija" [Let's promote widely film art within the working class], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 1 (1958): 3.

⁸⁵ "Yŏnghwa pogŭp saŏp esŏ hyŏksin ūl irŭk'ija! P'yŏng'an namdo yŏnghwa pogŭp saŏp e taehayŏ" [Let's reform film distribution! About film distribution in South Pyongan province], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 9 (1959): 3.

As we keep this question in mind, it is important to remember that the so-called “cultural revolution” (*munwha hyŏngmyŏng*) announced by the Korean Workers’ Party in the mid-1950s was to take place in the movie theater. Dubbed by the government the “pioneer” (*sŏnguja*) of the cultural revolution and the nation’s new “cultural center” (*munhwa ūi chŏndang*), the movie theater was an indispensable element of the worker’s cultural life as envisioned by the state.⁸⁶ As such, the movie theater was, in effect, a multifunctional space serving a variety of purposes in addition to its main function as a place for film exhibition. This was especially true in the case of workplace cinemas, whose space was commonly used for discussion groups, lectures, exhibitions, conferences, recitals, music concerts, and other special events. In that sense, the workplace cinema, placed in the very heart of the socialist production process, epitomized the movie theater’s new role of a cultural center for the working class.⁸⁷

And yet, when it came to show time, worksite exhibitors had to struggle with the problem of dwindling attendance. In September of 1958, the theater staff at the Pyongyang Rubber Factory reported the fulfillment of its film exhibition plan by 131 percent, while its audience mobilization plan was fulfilled only by 82 percent. The failure to attract larger numbers of viewers was blamed on the staff’s negligent attitude to film advertising (*sangyŏng chŏn sŏnjŏn*).⁸⁸ This appears to have been an issue not unique to this factory alone. Lackadaisical attendance of employer-organized screenings seems to have been a common problem at the time, so much so that on September 5, 1958 a

⁸⁶ “Yŏnghwa pogŭp pumun sangban nyŏndo ch’onghwa chinhaeng” [Progress in the area of film distribution for the first half of the year], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 9 (1959): 53.

⁸⁷ Kim Kung-sŏp, “Kwangbudŭl ūi yŏnghwagwan” [A miners’ movie theater], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 9 (1959): 19-21.

⁸⁸ Kim Tŏk-chu, “P’yŏngyang komu kongjang yŏnghwagwan ūn ōttŏk’e Ch’ŏllima rŭl t’anŭnga” [How is Pyongyang rubber factory participating in Chollima?], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 12 (1958): 24.

cabinet order no. 91 decreed a partial reorganization of the existing film distribution system, effectively transferring all workplace theaters under the direct jurisdiction of trade unions. The new law placed more control over all aspects of film programming in the hands of specific worker organizations, which would now have to report directly to their superiors at work rather than deal with physically absent distributors regarding all matters related to workplace exhibition, as had been the case in the past.⁸⁹

While the same article reported a spike in attendance numbers and in overall interest in film-viewing following the adoption of this measure, the quick success attributed to the resulting reorganization remains dubious at best, given that the underlying reasons for workers' less than enthusiastic embrace of "office flicks" had not been eliminated. Arguably, the biggest issue with this type of cinema was the fact that going to the movies at work was seen as an obligation, perhaps a pleasant one at first, but none the less an obligation. Most films shown at workplace theaters were educational documentaries, newsreels, and shorts. Occasionally, a regional film distributor would send a feature film, but it seems that bona fide movie theaters in major urban centers would normally take priority over workplace cinemas in their film distribution plans. Thus, workers at the country's numerous factories were, in essence, no other than a captive audience who in reality had little control over their own leisure or the choice of entertainment. Foisted upon them from above, the timing, the form, and the content of workers' recreation was not a matter of their own choice.

Furthermore, workplace screenings were usually held separately for every department (*tcheho pyöllo*). In other words, one would have had to attend such screenings in an organized fashion with everyone else, including one's higher-ups, which would, as

⁸⁹ Ibid., 24-25.

a matter of course, place certain constraints on one's public behavior and preclude the kind of experience one would find in a neighborhood cinema where this type of self-censorship did not exist.⁹⁰ As this chapter will show, the kind of movie experience that working-class audiences sought at the time could only have been found outside the factory movie theater and was not available to them elsewhere.

As if to exacerbate the predicament and highlight the involuntary nature of the “office flicks” experience, many companies began to designate in-house film screenings as work rotation time.⁹¹ Perhaps, taking a break away from a lathe, indeed, offered some respite from work. Yet, subjecting oneself to the movies one could not care less about – and often multiple times, as reruns, especially of films that were supposed to boost productivity, were quite common and everyone was expected to attend them – was definitely more in the category of mental strain than leisure, less so that of entertainment. With the passing of the new law, however, workplace exhibitors now wielded more power to enforce attendance, including that of what was traditionally the least well-attended part of organized screenings – educational lectures during intermissions and post-screening discussion groups.

Predictably, the choice of film material for workplace exhibition was largely motivated by production exigencies. Thus, onsite cinemas usually featured what was known as “subject films” (*tchema yŏnghwa*) dealing with specific topics, such as cultural construction in the countryside or the growing selection of consumer goods, or “campaign films” (*kkamp'a yŏnghwa*) advertising major events and campaigns, such as

⁹⁰ I would like to thank Chad Norris for drawing my attention to this and stimulating me to further consider the implications of workplace film-viewing.

⁹¹ Kim, “‘P’yŏngyang komu kongjang,” 24-25.

recent elections, Korean-Soviet friendship, and the anniversary of Pyongyang's founding.⁹² While *tchema* and *kkamp'a* documentaries would also appear on the bill of neighborhood picture-houses, for workplace exhibitors these accounted for the bulk of their programming, although every now and then they, too, could feature an occasional Soviet movie.⁹³

In order to get the word out about upcoming film shows, workplace theaters employed a staff of so-called "film promoters" (*yŏnghwa pogŭpwŏn*) who would go from one department to another during the factory's business hours before every premiere advertising the newly arrived picture to the workers. Just like the famous "barkers" (*bonisseurs*) in the early days of cinema who would stand outside movie theaters advertising the film in an effort to attract an audience,⁹⁴ North Korean film promoters had to resort to public performance and the use of their interpersonal skills to spark workers' interest. Oral presentations by film promoters took the place of film trailers during this period, only that these hawkers had to rely on the power of the spoken word and imagination instead of that of the moving image itself in order to lure their audiences. Key to the film promoters' task was making compelling connections between the film's subject matter and the laboring audience's everyday life and work, so that prospective viewers would realize how seeing the film could benefit them in some practical way.⁹⁵

⁹² Ri Hyŏng-no, "1957 nyŏndo kirok, sibo, kwahak pogŭp yŏnghwa ch'angjo saŏp ūi sŏng'kwa" [Successes in production of documentary, newsreel, and science films in 1957], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 2 (1958): 14-15.

⁹³ Kim, "P'yŏngyang komu kongjang," 25.

⁹⁴ Germain Lacasse, "The Lecturer and the Attraction," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. by Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 181.

⁹⁵ Kim, "P'yŏngyang komu kongjang," 25.

In this manner, the worker-spectator was made to conform to the demands of the system, whether s/he liked it or not. The forced nature of the workplace moviegoing experience, with its pronounced didactic element and the constant pressure to participate regardless of one's personal affinity, must have taken all the fun out of what moviegoing is normally associated with, even in socialist countries. No wonder these "captive audiences" would flee the instant they could and comply whenever they no longer enjoyed the luxury of escape from their daily "torment by cinema." Workplace theaters became filled once again and everything looked fine on the surface. But the conformist spectator was only holding his other self in check.

One may certainly regard the industry's turn to widescreen cinema in the late 1950s in the context of tepid general interest in "office flicks" and disappointingly low attendance numbers. The new widescreen format emphasizing spectacle and a stronger realist effect (often hyperbolically referred to as "3D" in contemporary discourses) would have probably overshadowed the less exciting aspects of workplace moviegoing, although a full conversion of all in-house cinemas to widescreen in the late 1950s and early 1960s still appears to have been highly unrealistic, given the technical challenges and the financial costs of such an enterprise. Furthermore, it seems that these issues had already been more or less effectively addressed by means of a new policy of enforced mandatory attendance of all work-sponsored film events. After all, workers' participation in onsite screenings and corollary educational meetings seems to have drastically improved following the reorganization.

Perhaps, then, the industry had another motive to persevere in its struggle to introduce new attractions, such as widescreen, color, and stereophonic sound, that had

little to do with raising the popular interest in moviegoing. The answer to this question will become clear, once we examine the other model of film spectatorship prominent during this period associated with the neighborhood theater in which the “conformist spectator” we have been preoccupied with until this point will finally get a chance to reveal his true colors.

3.3 The Postwar Movie Theater as the New “Street”

A contemporary account offers the following description of Pyongyang’s streets at night: “Every evening, East Pyongyang’s Youth Street begins to liven up. Members of Chollima work brigades strutting spiritedly as they praise each other’s accomplishments at work that day and discuss advanced working methods, university students gazing at the flickering night stars and talking about space rockets as they dream about future space travel, young married women and elderly gentlemen following on their heels – everyone is scurrying in the direction of the Tongdaewŏn movie theater. Even though it is still at least half an hour before the doors open, every day without fail spectators begin to gather in quite early.”⁹⁶

A magnet for men and women, young and old alike, the neighborhood movie theater emerges undisputedly as a new center of bustling social life in postwar North Korea. Paradoxically, it is there that everyone seems to make his or her way instead of the workplace cinemas. While the latter were struggling to keep their attendance numbers, their neighborhood counterpart, by contrast, knew no such worry. In fact, the opposite

⁹⁶ Kil Su-am, “Munhwajŏgin yŏnghwagwan” [A cultural movie theater], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 12 (1959): 42.

was true. Neighborhood cinemas were frequently as overcrowded as the infamous North Korean buses, filling a standard 600-seat theater far beyond its allowed capacity.⁹⁷

Just like with the boarding of the city bus, long lively lines of impatient moviegoers trying to make their way in at any cost would form outside theaters every night. The more resourceful and daring clientele would resort to all sorts of ruses in order to get in for a show without having to pay for admission.



Figure 3.1. Jesters at the movies

⁹⁷ Kye Hun-hyök, “Pongsasöng” [The spirit of service], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1959): 27.

The most common way to get a free ride at the movies was to pretend you had to see someone in the administration for business or for a personal matter, so that the theater personnel at the door would grant you the right of passage (Figure 3.1).⁹⁸ The layout of the movie theater, too, with one main entrance which granted access to the rest of the building, including the theater lobby, the viewing room, and all administrative offices, made it easy for these imposters to sneak into a show, if only they played their part well and could pass the ticket checkers.⁹⁹ Once inside, they could hardly be found again, blending quickly with the other fare-paying patrons. These gate-crashers aggravated the problem of theater overcrowding, if not caused it in the first place, leading to all kinds of incidents, including broken furniture.¹⁰⁰

In order for us to understand why the toiling masses would be reluctant to attend work-sponsored screenings, yet would go out of their way to see a show at a neighborhood cinema, we would need to know how exactly the latter experience differed from the former. The reason neighborhood theaters were such a great hit at the time has to do with the kind of experience they afforded, which simply could not have been conceivable in an official work setting. The local picture-house, while sharing many of the same attributes with the factory movie theater, embodied and dramatized the informal “street” culture discussed at length in the previous chapter. It was not simply that people flocked to these theaters out of desire to see “exotic” foreign films, but rather to participate in something quite very different, which workplace cinemas failed to deliver.

⁹⁸ “T’amjodŭng: ‘P’yŏlli’han pangmun” [Searchlight: A visit of convenience], *Hwalsal* 58 (1955): 5.

⁹⁹ Kim Ki-ch’ŏl, “Yŏnghwagwan p’yŏjun sŏlgye chaksŏng e kwanhan myŏt kaji cheŭi” [Some recommendations on the construction of standard movie theater facilities], *Kŏnch’uk kwa kŏnsŏl* 8 (1958): 38-39.

¹⁰⁰ Kye, “Pongsasŏng,” 27.

The emergence of “street” as a site of disorganized play in the postwar decade, as I have suggested, was largely a result of the material conditions in which the country found itself after the signing of the armistice agreement that finally put a stop to the morass of the Korean War (1950-53). With the leisure infrastructure demolished in aerial bombings and the public left to their own devices, the street offered, perhaps, the only viable alternative to officially sanctioned forms of public entertainment. The street culture thus becomes the dominant mode of public self-divertissement during this time, affecting also the way in which North Koreans participated in organized cultural activities.

While much of cultural programming continued to be in disarray in immediate postwar years, as things were gradually getting back to normal, the state’s unflinching commitment to cinema as the most effective medium of mass education was one thing that remained unchanged. Yet, not even the movie theater, promoted as the new center of cultural life during the postbellum reconstruction, was immune from the contagion of the mischievous spirit of street play. In fact, the culture of street jesting finds a new home in the picture-house, the very place slated by the state to be the model of organized recreation and education, adapting it to the ludic needs of the rowdy masses.

Ridden by chronic financial and technical problems, the cinema of the 1950s both epitomized the more universal state of disarray into which the country had plunged and further encouraged, if unwittingly, the popular taste for delinquent behavior of the public at large. Ironically, the movie theater together with the cinematic apparatus it housed enabled the very forms of social behavior that the state was seeking to eradicate. Thus, instead of banishing, even if only temporarily, the street from public life, the movie

theater, on the contrary, enshrined its spirit in the very materiality of its structures, devices, and processes by enabling the continued practice of social deviousness – in fact, by ritualizing it.

Despite their obvious differences, the movie theater and the street were never truly polar opposites during the 1950s, contrary to what the authorities would have liked to see. For one thing, theaters, hastily erected in the wake of the war, were overwhelmingly temporary structures intended to be eventually replaced by permanent ones in the near future. Many of these makeshift installations violated existing regulations and safety codes for exhibition venues. For instance, the majority of theaters were not even heated during the winter season, while those few that were would frequently create additional fire hazards, as exhibitors would install heating equipment inside the building, filling it with smoke and dust from the coal used for heating.¹⁰¹

In terms of public hygiene, these structures also left much to be desired. A standard movie theater at the time seating around 500-600 people would only have one latrine for every 100 patrons, whereas in some cases no indoor lavatory was provided at all.¹⁰² Theater lobbies, which served as waiting areas where crowds could pass their time before the feature presentation and during the intermission, in reality, differed quite little from the actual street. Filled with cigarette smoke and littered with ticket stubs and candy wrappers, they did not offer much to occupy their restless guests with. Patrons, who tended to be on the side of students and young adults, were under no pressure to modify

¹⁰¹ Ch'oe Kong-ok, "Wisaeng munhwa saöp esö hyöksin ül irük'ja!" [Let's reform our culture of hygiene!], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 11 (1959): 9.

¹⁰² Kim, "Yŏnghwagwan p'yŏjun sŏlgye," 42.

their street behavior when they stepped inside the cinema, often bringing street food with them, such as roasted chestnuts, along with their ordinary street antics and pranks.¹⁰³

Despite the state's continuing efforts to educate the public in the virtues of cleanliness, old uncouth ways were the hardest to eradicate. Since public hygiene was regarded as the sign of culture and modernity, the government took the lack of progress in this area very much to heart. So much so that in 1959 it commissioned the film studio to produce a short comedy film on the topic of hygiene culture in order to rebuke the entrenched sinners by means of public ridicule and exposure. In addition, the documentary film studio sent out camera crews all over the capital city of Pyongyang on a hunt to find and document the most outrageous instances of social "backwardness" (*rakhuhan hyōngsandŭl*).¹⁰⁴ Documentarians dispatched on this mission were to scour Pyongyang's public spaces, including apartment buildings, restaurants, dormitories, hotels, schools, parks, railway stations, streets, and *movie theaters*, for evidence of persisting hillbilly practices in the age of "cultural revolution." The collected footage was intended to put viewers to shame in a hope that they would finally repent and learn the lesson of good manners, as they laugh (*usŭm sok esŏ*) with embarrassment at the images they were only be too familiar with.¹⁰⁵

The unkempt appearance of the movie theater, however, was not the only similarity it shared with the street. As already mentioned, the standard repertoire of street jesting, identified most prominently with the North Korean bus stop, applied as equally to

¹⁰³ Kil, "Munhwajōgin yōnghwagwan," 42.

¹⁰⁴ "Munhwa hyōngmyōng chuje ūi yōnghwa chejak" [Making films on the subject of cultural revolution], *Chosŏn yōnghwa* 11 (1959): 4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

the movie theater, with its line-cutting, scuffles, and public pranks. In that respect, the movie theater was not merely an extension of the street, but it was, one could say, its amplification. While the movie theater resembled the North Korean street in its overall lack of what authorities at the time would refer to as “cultural appearance” (*munhwasǒng*)¹⁰⁶ and in the fact that it attracted largely the same demographic, there was also one important difference that we must not overlook. Unlike the street proper, the movie theater offered both more possibilities for various comical situations to arise, as well as a large captive audience in front of which moviegoing jesters could now stage their improvised performances. As a confined space that crammed boisterous masses into semi-anonymous darkness, unlike the workplace cinema, the neighborhood theater was an ideal breeding ground for mischief and mayhem.

3.4 The Cinema of Fits and Starts

With the advent of sound and the emergence of classical Hollywood style which set a certain standard and ideal for cinemas around the world, including those of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, a classic movie experience became identified with the spectator’s complete immersion into the diegetic world of the film, or its fictional narrative space. The new widescreen technology was meant to further enhance the illusion of an alternate cinematic reality unfolding on the now extended screen, with audiences being fully consumed by the newest modern spectacle. The classic movie experience, characterized by its technically seamless quality and a complete absorption of the viewer, came to be seen as incompatible with anything that would contravene this

¹⁰⁶ Ch’oe, “Wisaeng munhwa,” 8-9.

principle. An ideal for which the North Korean film industry also strived proved much harder to attain in real life than one would have hoped.

Owing to numerous technological and economic constraints, North Korean picture-houses of the 1950s were a far cry from ideal viewing conditions. Technical issues with film projection seem to have been an endemic problem even in larger cities, frequently turning a film-viewing experience into an adventure in its own right. Whether the problem was an old projector or a poorly trained projectionist or a combination of both, film presentations seem to have rarely run without a glitch. In fact, it appears as if glitches were an essential part of the cinema experience in this period.

While the average number of people who went to the movies had increased by more than six times compared to the prewar levels from 60,000 to 380,000 people a day, the country's three film studios could not keep up with that rate of growth in terms of production of films.¹⁰⁷ As a result, the majority of movies shown in the country's theaters were mostly older Soviet pictures. Subject to the wear and tear owing to frequent projections on old equipment and the lack of proper care accorded to them, old Soviet film prints were the bane of any projectionist's work. They would frequently break, especially in places where they had ruptured before and had been glued back together. Each print required at least three hours of careful inspection and repair before it could be safely shown to the audience.¹⁰⁸

Even Pyongyang's major movie theaters, such as the famous Taedongmun Cinema, had to constantly deal with this sort of technical issues. The theater's projectionist, Pak Chu-hwa, relates that one time an especially shabby print of the Soviet

¹⁰⁷ "Yŏngwha pogŭp saŏp esŏ hyŏnksin ŭl irŭk'ja!," 3.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 4.

film, *Don Quixote* (1957), landed in his hands. In fact, the copy was in such a poor condition that it broke more than three times during projection. It was since then that he began to carefully inspect every single print that showed any sign of wear and tear before showing it to the public. On one occasion, he had to spend over six hours mending a very old print of another Soviet film, *Othello* (1955) to be able to show it to his audiences. With his patience and a sense of responsibility, Pak was probably more of an exception than a rule among contemporary projectionists. While the government standard set the limit at 500 projections for every film copy, Pak was able to push this limit to over 2,000 projections of the same print, saving the precious state resources.¹⁰⁹ No wonder the majority of circulating prints even of fairly recent productions, such as *Don Quixote*, would degrade rather rapidly.

According to contemporary sources, however, most projectionists showed neither the diligence, nor the competence of Pak. The lack of qualified film technicians was acutely felt even at the level of provincial projector repair centers (*yǒngsang'gi suriso*), where film projectors would be sent in from across the province for inspection and repair, often as the last resort, when nothing further could be done by the in-house staff. However, many of these centers, such as the one in the South P'yŏng'an Province, admittedly had often trouble determining what the problems with malfunctioning projectors were in the first place. Nor did they follow any set plan for regular inspections and repairs.¹¹⁰

The situation was both grave and pervasive enough that in August of 1960 the Central Committee of the Korean Workers' Party mandated additional training for

¹⁰⁹ “Yǒngsa kisulwŏn ŭi nundongja” [Projectionist's pupil], *Chosŏn yǒnghwa* 6 (1959): 25.

¹¹⁰ “Yǒngwha pogŭp saŏp esŏ hyŏnksin ŭl irŭk'ja!” 4.

technical cadres. The training was to take place at the country's one and only School of Film Managers (*Yŏnghwa kanbu hakkyŏ*) located just outside Pyongyang in the vicinity of the North Korean film studio. Opened in August of 1949 as a training place for film projectionists, it continued to operate through the war years, changing to its current name in April of 1954. Following the name change, the school also expanded its focus to offer continuing education and training programs to active managers and technicians. Between 1949 and 1960, over 1,200 film specialists graduated from it (Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2. Students at the Pyongyang School of Film Managers

The new law of 1960 called for increased hours and change in curriculum to ensure that more cadres now could get better training. The students were required to spend a total of 1,620 hours in class plus an additional six weeks of onsite practical training, which entailed working with an actual team of technical staff of a movie theater or a mobile

projection unit.¹¹¹ Yet, even the new measures could not remedy the situation overnight. As the government made its bet on the training of better technical cadres rather than on a massive upgrade to the rapidly aging national park of film projectors, the technical failures were bound to continue.

Apart from frequent breaks of old film prints during projection, other common issues that plagued almost every exhibitor in the country included problems with image and sound quality. One would have been lucky to see a film from beginning to end in the correct aspect ratio with a clear, sharp image in good focus. Many a time, that was not the case. It was not unusual for the spectator to have to endure through frequent interruptions, fuzzy picture quality, and other surprise glitches, which compromised the integrity of the cinematic experience.¹¹² Attaining image sharpness and focus, as well as clear sound were the two main goals that seem to have remained most elusive for North Korea's film exhibitors. Perhaps, it would be unfair, however, to put all the blame on projectionists' lack of expertise, as the government would. After all, as the pundits admitted themselves, much of the existing equipment and many of the film prints in circulation were in such a poor condition that they were often deemed beyond repair.

Apparently, this state of affairs could not have made for a classic cinematic experience, as outlined above. Contemporary accounts tell of frustrated audiences standing in long lines by ticket counters outside or stranded inside unlit theaters waiting for the show to start often for as long as half an hour past the announced time, while the projectionist would be trying to solve the problem with the malfunctioning equipment or

¹¹¹ Kim Yong-sŏp, "Saero charananŭn kisul injaedŭl: Yŏnghwa kanbu hakkyŏ rŭl ch'ajasŏ" [Fledgling technical cadres: A visit to a film managers school], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 10 (1960): 15-16.

¹¹² Wang Chong-dŏk, "Yŏngsa kisul ũi chil ŭl nop'yŏ talla!" [Raise the quality of projection technique!], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 10 (1959): 18.

another shabby print. Reports flooded from all over the country, both from remote rural areas as well as from major provincial centers, about constant interruptions, glitches, and technical failures. If it was not an issue with equipment, there would have most likely been something else to cause a problem, as it happened, for example, at Myöngsöng Cinema in Ch'öngjin, North Hamgyöng Province, where a projectionist showed two reels of the film out of order, causing an uproar in the audience.¹¹³

One cannot come to fully appreciate the nature of the moviegoing experience in North Korea during this time without taking into account this situation of chronic and almost universal breakdown and disrepair. In a peculiar reversal of the classic model, film-viewing during this period was largely defined by ruptures and discontinuities. What is even more startling is that this inadvertent “cinema of fits and starts” did not stop audiences from coming back, as we can clearly see from contemporary accounts. On the contrary, they continued to storm their neighborhood movie theaters on a daily basis with unabated enthusiasm.

Were the people coming back *despite* the ever-present glitches or, perhaps, *for* their very sake is the question I would like to pose here. Furthermore, while all exhibitors, workplace and neighborhood alike, were accident-prone, it does not stand to reason that a person would flee from one venue and dash to another only to experience the same kind of exasperation over technical problems that continued to plague film projection throughout this period. Given that all other conditions remained the same, there must have been, most probably, something else that set the two types of venue apart. If it was not the accident-ridden apparatus itself, then, perhaps, it was the audiences' mode of

¹¹³ “1 pun ŭi chiyöni 500 pun ŭl hōbi” [One-minute delay is a 500-minute waste], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 11 (1958): 44.

engagement with it and the experience it afforded which time and again led them back to the neighborhood theater, a conundrum that undermines the explanatory power of the classical model of film spectatorship and requires the development of a new hermeneutics of filmgoing based on the further study of this, in many ways, very unique historical moment.

3.5 The Voices of Laughter

Technical problems with film projection created a fertile ground for “street” jesters in the audience to hijack those moments of unplanned hiatus and public confusion, filling in the silence of unexpected and awkward gaps with their own performances and provocations. As the instigators of public commotion, they can be implicated in fundamentally changing the nature of the theater experience for the average moviegoer by virtue of their very presence in their midst. Yet, their role was hardly limited to self-conscious comedic stunts in the interstices between halting feature presentation. The entirety of the theatrical experience was punctuated by their sustained presence, calling attention to itself during the moments of cinematic rupture. The reason the jesting activity was not contained within the intermittent spaces of forced recess alone, however, has to do with the existence of another locus of spectatorial disruption associated with sound. If projectionists’ errors and film breaks, in particular, fractured the integrity of the spectatorial experience, introducing fissures in the very fabric of what was supposed to be a continuous and uninterrupted process of immersion and identification, issues with sound caused a different kind of spectator alienation.

Interestingly, sound problems had less to do with technology per se than with the human factor in the technological process. Or, perhaps, we could say that technology in this case was involved in a more tangential or intermediary way. Of course, industry watchdogs tended to put the blame for any sound-related snafus on sound engineers, just as they blamed any problems with image quality on projectionists. It is true that sound engineers had to take, at least, part of the blame for acoustic imperfections during film presentations. Yet, what truly provided opportunities for surprise comic release more so than any sonic distortion was, in fact, no other than the diegetic speech itself. Both voiceover commentary and actors' speech often became the source of unintended amusement for the distracted audiences.

Word, in its broadest sense, – referring to language, in general, both in its spoken and written forms – is, perhaps, the one most exploited medium of the comedian. Traditionally, verbal jokes, as well as much of comic literature, have revolved around linguistic contradictions, inconsistencies, and miscommunications, creating endless scenarios for word play and comic stimulation. It is even more so when the outcome of a linguistic situation is completely unexpected, as the element of surprise is key to creating a comic dynamic. Linguistic blunders thus can be a veritable wellspring of unintended hilarity, extremely potent in their effect. It is here in the realm of onscreen voice acting that we encounter innumerable instances of unpremeditated comicality, which no doubt fed the public desire for amusement.

Articles in contemporary film journals criticize domestic productions for their lack of attention to the issue of diction. Literally, the “art of speaking” (*hwasul*) in Korean, diction seemed to be the skill few North Korean actors could add to their

professional credentials. This was especially true of most young actors who had only recently joined the ranks of the country's film industry. Unlike more experienced actors who were also more advanced in years, the younger neophytes apparently had trouble with adhering to traditional orthoepic norms. Some critics explained this by the lack of systematic education in the Korean language and grammar their generation had received.¹¹⁴ Due to the dislocations as a result of the Korean War, standard Korean became enriched lexically, phonetically, and grammatically by numerous regional dialects. Many words, expressions, and pronunciations formerly associated with particular dialects now became part of the standard North Korean language. However, the proliferation of regional dialects also created certain difficulties when it came to the big screen. Film workers and officials were deeply concerned about how the abuse of accents and dialects could impair audience's understanding of what was being said or change the intended meaning of a word or phrase to something rather different.¹¹⁵

Apparently, the reason voice acting became neglected during this period has to do with the peculiarities of the production process. Since North Korean film industry did not possess the technology for simultaneous sound recording at the time, studio-recorded sound had to be added during the post-production stage. As a result, North Korean film actors would pay little attention to their dialogue lines when shooting a scene, focusing instead on their performance before the camera as a form of bodily movement, such as posture, locomotion, gesticulation, and facial expression. One contemporary actor, Ŏm Kil-sŏn, admitted that he had never thought of film acting as a speech-centered art form

¹¹⁴ Ri T'ae-hung, "Paeu ŭi hwasul kwa ŏnŏ kyubŏm" [Standards of diction and language for actors], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 12 (1964): 8.

¹¹⁵ Chŏng Yong-ho, "P'yojunŏ wa pang'ŏn" [Standard speech and regional dialects], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 5 (1964): 46-47.

before, until his naturally hoarse voice and North Hamgyŏng dialect began to be a problem.¹¹⁶ He further intimates about the common practice of adding sound to the picture in those days. Actors would simply read their lines cold from the script without any preparation or rehearsal. As long as they got their lines, more or less, to match their lip movement on the screen, the job of adding dialogue sound was considered done, he explains.¹¹⁷

Of course, the flip side of this was that much of the emotional force and psychological depth inherent in voice performance was inevitably lost, which did not pass unnoticed among the audiences. Further compounded by technical issues with sound recording and sound reproduction, the filmic voice got distorted and transformed on its way to the spectator. While sound technicians, scriptwriters, and directors were also implicated in the unsatisfactory outcome, actors had to bear the brunt of the criticism. Critics connected the poor state of voice acting among North Korean film actors to the lack of education in scientific methods of pronunciation and vocalization.¹¹⁸ Even when actors did not have a regional dialect, their speech would often sound *as if* they had one, because they enunciated the script text with an incorrect intonation.¹¹⁹ To remedy this problem, beginning in the early 1960s, the trade journal, *Chosŏn yŏnghwa*, would publish lengthy tutorials in almost every issue with practical advice on voice training for the country's film actors.

¹¹⁶ Ŏm Kil-sŏn, "Na ŭi hwasul" [My diction], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 9 (1962): 16.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹⁸ Chu Yŏng-sŏp, "Taesa wa chŏngsŏ" [Dialogue and emotions], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 7 (1962): 36-37.

¹¹⁹ Ch'ae Kyu-jun, "P'yojunŏ, sat'uri, paeu" [Standard speech, dialect, actor], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1966): 25-26.

North Korean moviegoers complained that dialogue in domestic productions was hard to understand, and when they were able to understand it, it neither sounded very fluent, nor struck them as particularly clever.¹²⁰ It is hardly surprising that film experts would be greatly alarmed by these reports, as the situation was fraught with a number of undesired consequences. As many rightly pointed out, one of such undesired consequences was audience alienation. Sound came to be seen as a primary “factor in baring the falseness of performance” (*yŏn’gi ŭi kŏjit ŭl nannŭn yoso*),¹²¹ as one critic aptly put it, turning, perforce, any serious drama into a virtual farce, just like it happened with poorly translated foreign literature discussed in chapter 1. Some, rather uncharacteristically, even began to evoke the well-known method of the *sinp’a* school, disesteemed for its colonial associations, which emphasized both the form and the content of dramatic speech over dramatic action.¹²² Gesturing toward the ideologically tainted movement during the colonial period was unprecedented in its own right, even as a rhetorical device, only to show us how grave the problem with diction onscreen had become.

The implications of spectator alienation were immense. Flat, uninflected speech not only made it difficult to differentiate between characters, but also undercut the very illusion of realism. As one commentator noted, the same actors and actresses appeared in different films without making the necessary changes to their voice and appearance in accordance with the new role. The critic discusses how Kim Tong-gyu, an actor who

¹²⁰ Chu, “Taesa wa chŏngsŏ,” 36.

¹²¹ Hong In-sun, “Hwasul kwa yŏk ŭi sŏng’kyŏk” [Diction and the character of the role], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1963): 24.

¹²² Hong In-sun, “Hwasul esŏ chegitoenŭn myŏt kaji munje” [Some questions concerning diction], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 9 (1962): 34.

starred in two films set in completely different historical periods, failed to create convincing onscreen portrayals of his characters. Kim's representation of the famous 18th century itinerant poet Kim Sakkat in the 1950s film *Pak Yŏn-am* and his portrayal of an activist of the Korean nationalist movement during the 20th century in another 1950s picture *Tasi kŭrŏk'e sal su ŏpta* ("Can't Live Like This Again") allegedly take no notice of the varying historical milieus. If you closed your eyes, the critic writes, you could not tell the difference between the two characters based on their speech alone.¹²³

Traditionally, differences in age, gender, and social status are marked in the standard Korean language by means of distinctive grammatical endings, as well as through vocabulary and intonation. In addition to that, native speech usually also reflects regional influences and occupational backgrounds. Without these essential markers, the identity of the speaker cannot be accurately established. Predictably, any significant discrepancy between a given speech style and its source will engender situations ripe for comedy. And this is precisely what happened in movie theaters across the country. Accented speech, whether due to a regional dialect or poor voice acting skills, not only impaired the audience's understanding, as vexed officials rightly noted, but, more importantly, introduced an element of spontaneity, distraction, and levity into the cinematic experience which quickly spun out of control.

Dialect- and accent-ridden performances, when not diegetically motivated, rather counterproductively called attention to the personality of the actor instead of effacing it. Foregrounding the stagedness of the performance was a sure recipe for unintended comic effects and even more so when this occurred during moments of dramatic tension. Just like Jean Hagen's character Lina Lamont in Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen's 1952

¹²³ Ibid., 35.

classic *Singin' in the Rain* sends the audience into an uncontrollable fit of laughter when she begins speaking with an inimitable New York accent in one of the romantic scenes of the period piece she is starring in, North Korean movie stars would, likewise, confound and amuse, if only unwittingly, their audiences when their accents would stick out like a sore thumb, shattering asunder any vestiges of cinematic illusion remaining after the damage already done by a remiss projectionist.

The predicament with voice acting was further aggravated by faulty sound recording practices. As I already mentioned, all sound effects, including voice, were added later in the studio. However, when adding these sound effects, it was not uncommon for sound specialists to ignore the relations of distance and depth of field. In other words, the commonsense principle that sounds issuing from more remote sources should sound weaker compared to those coming from sources close by was repeatedly violated as a matter of negligent practice, giving further reasons for the already distracted audiences to get even more distracted.¹²⁴

Yet, we should not forget that domestic productions still accounted for a very small number of all films screened in North Korea during the postwar decade. The director of the national film studio, Ch'u Min, reported that his studio produced seven pictures in 1956 and nine in 1957. The majority of homemade productions were coming from the documentary film studio in the form of documentaries, newsreels, and science films, which were both easier and much less costly to make.¹²⁵ Trying to increase the

¹²⁴ Kim Chae-ch'un, "Ŭmhyang ŏnŏ ŭi chinsilsŏng" [Truthfulness of acoustic speech], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1963): 24-26.

¹²⁵ "Yŏnghwa saŏp ŭl kailch'ŭng palchŏn sik'ija!" [Let's further develop the film industry!], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 4 (1958): 3-5.

number of feature films produced locally in a relatively short period of time without having all the requisite resources explains the overall state of incompetence which pervaded the industry throughout the latter half of the 1950s.

Ironically, the drive for expanded production of films was accompanied by a new regime of maximum saving (*ch'oedaehan ũi ch'ölyak kwa ch'oedaehan ũi chŭngsan*), which was announced by the Party's Central Committee in December of 1956. As a result of this campaign, production costs per film were said to have been lowered by 17 percent. Tighter financial controls also translated into reduced production schedules, resulting in an average shooting time of between two and three months per film.¹²⁶ No wonder issues arose at every stage of the creative process, given the pressure to produce more with fewer resources. Thus, the success of the new policy of frugal spending was rather dubious. While the studio struggled to meet its new production norms, many of the new films were either found deficient (*ojakp'um*) or simply never made it to theaters, as the studio could not make a sufficient number of distribution copies on schedule.¹²⁷ Time and again, the country's film industry had to rely on Soviet movies to keep its audiences occupied.

3.6 The Clown in the Machine

The state of chaos and disarray, which dominated cinema in North Korea during this period, also affected the fate of foreign films that made it to the nation's big screens.

¹²⁶ Ch'u Min, "Yöngghwa yesul ch'angjo saöp esö ũi ch'ölyak kwa chŭngsan" [Saving and expanding film production], *Chosŏn yöngghwa* 4 (1958): 29-30.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 30.

Accounting for the majority of films shown in the country, foreign pictures were overwhelmingly Soviet in origin. According to extant records, the North Korean film studio had only one department responsible for providing dubbing and subtitling for most Soviet motion pictures released nationally. Apparently, the understaffed department could not handle the amount of work commensurate with the volume of Soviet movies imported into the DPRK.¹²⁸ It should come as no surprise then that the quality of its work often left much to be desired. To address this issue, the government mandated to further increase the standard daily norm for translators in line with the new policy of “expanded production and maximum saving.” The goal was to have all foreign films either subtitled or dubbed into Korean by 1961.¹²⁹

But what happened to those films which fell through the system’s cracks? How were they presented to North Korean audiences? The answer to this question can be found on the pages of contemporary film journals which tell us about the revival of film lecturers, or “interpreters” (*haesŏlja*), as they were commonly called in North Korea in the 1950s. Film historians remind us that, although the use of film lecturers is normally identified with the early era of silent cinema, this practice was not discontinued even after the advent of sound in many places around the world, in particular, in those countries that imported cinema.¹³⁰ North Korea in the 1950s happened to be one of such places.

¹²⁸ “Haesŏl yŏnghwa nŭn ōttŏk’e chejakhanŭnga?” [How are narrated films made?], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 2 (1960): 26.

¹²⁹ “Yŏnghwa pogŭp esŏ ŭi hyŏksin ŭl wihayŏ chipchungjŏk imyŏ kidongjŏk ŭro p’illim p’yŏnsŏng: Yŏnghwa pogŭpsa esŏ” [Innovating in the film industry: At a film distribution company], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 11 (1958): 9.

¹³⁰ Lacasse, “The Lecturer and the Attraction,” 182-183.

Throughout the 1950s, it was a common practice to have one “interpreter” dub over an entire film. Exhibitors complained that the majority of foreign films they received from distributors were dubbed over by the same monotonous voice usually belonging to a middle-aged male “interpreter” and requested that studios provide dubbing in, at least, two different voices for male and female parts. They also insisted that these offscreen ventriloquists should use different “voices” through variations in pitch and tone to reflect the differences in individual characters made manifest through their respective speech mannerisms.¹³¹ Most of these “interpreters,” however, had not received any training in voice acting and would simply read off the translation sheets that were provided by the translation department. If anything, their main concern was to match the lines appearing in the accompanying translations with the action on the screen. That in itself often presented a formidable challenge, as journals reported still in the mid-1960s that even in documentary films, which were normally much easier to dub for lack of dialogues in them, voiceover narration was frequently out of sync with the length of individual shots.¹³²

The ghost of an ever-dissolving unity of sound and image, which fundamentally ensures the illusion of continuity in cinema and structures our processes of identification with the conjured diegetic space, would haunt North Korean exhibitors during this decade, subverting cinema’s pretenses to representational realism. Together with the never-ending mishaps during projection, these recurring technical ruptures would effect a virtual “technological striptease” of the cinematic apparatus, baring the parts of the

¹³¹ “Silgam innün haesölja!” [A convincing explainer!], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 5 (1959): 25.

¹³² An Ch’ang-yu, “Haesŏlmun kwa hyŏngsang” [Narration text and representation], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 10 (1966): 20.

filmmaking process – its “seams,” so to speak – that were not intended for the spectator’s eyes. The repeated failure of the apparatus – its “glitch” – is, in fact, no other than what Henri Bergson calls an “automatism” which, according to his analysis, is the product of a “*mechanization* of life.”¹³³ It is when the mechanical prevails over the organic, the rigid over the elastic, the automatic over the human – regardless of a particular form this may take – it is *then* that the comic shows its face and laughter is aroused.

The North Korean movie theater provided ample opportunities for engendering situations ripe for comic outbursts, as the specter of the mechanical unruliness was a continuous presence throughout this period. As if to caricaturize the disturbed relationship between the imaginary world of the moving pictures and the unexpectedly, and inopportunately, revealed nuts and bolts of the behind-the-scenes operations which made it possible, many exhibitors would employ their own “interpreters” to provide live dubbing. In fact, live dubbing by an “interpreter” hiding in a projection booth and speaking through a microphone was essentially a wizard of Oz type of performance gone awry. The “interpreter” was a little man hiding inside an impressive apparatus par excellence. Only that he did not have to be discovered by anyone – his presence was made felt through his own lack of professional artifice.

According to contemporary accounts, live narration was often fraught with numerous problems of all kinds. For one thing, narration scripts accompanying foreign films that had neither dubbing, nor subtitles were often incomplete or inaccurate, if not altogether missing. To add to all these problems, most “interpreters” had little or no command of Russian to be able to make up for inadequate translation scripts. As a result, it was not unusual to have entire segments of a film left without any dubbing or

¹³³ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 101.

explanation whatsoever. This was especially common when it came to the more difficult parts of the story replete with the use of poetic metaphors, idioms, or cultural references unfamiliar to a non-native speaker without a good grasp of Russian culture and history. Discontented theater patrons complained that incompetent “interpreters” would often fail to enunciate all the words clearly, would speak with a strong accent or use unfamiliar words impairing their comprehension, or fall out of sync with the action on the screen causing the audience to erupt in scornful protestations (Figure 3.3).¹³⁴

The excess of comic tension within the neighborhood theater, which was emerging as the new norm, sure enough removed any last self-controls that could have still inhibited the expression of the audience’s indignation at the implosion of the harried exhibition process and the subversion of their own film-viewing experience. Those who chose to stay, as contemporary reports reveal, would hoot, hiss, and vent out their exasperation – and concomitantly, great excitement – over the continuous flood of irresistibly funny snafus and ruptures engendered and further amplified by the disintegrating apparatus, which marked almost every filmgoing venture in North Korea at the time. In the midst of the group hysteria sweeping the theater, some “interpreters” could engage in heated exchanges with their unruly audiences or even walk out on them, leaving the wayward spectator to his own devices, instead of containing the imminent crises of total chaos.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ “Pogonŭn sip’ŭnde tŭkkiga sirŏsŏ” [Want to see, but not to hear], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 4 (1958): 52-53.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 52-53.



Figure 3.3. Out-of-sync voiceover narrators

The experience was not unlike that described by a number of early film historians in the context of what has come to be known as the “cinema of attractions.”¹³⁶ Only this time, a rather similar result reminiscent of the fin-de-siècle culture of fairgrounds and vaudeville was predicated on a very dissimilar set of historical circumstances.

This spontaneously arisen “socialist vaudeville,” if you will, within the confines of the neighborhood movie theater in response to the overwhelming number of technical and other challenges of the industry that was struggling to stay afloat was precisely what the youthful North Korean state was so desperately trying to reverse by means of chasing after the widescreen bandwagon. The new attractions were necessary – in fact, they were critical at this historical juncture – not simply in order to stay technologically abreast of

¹³⁶ For more on the “cinema of attractions,” see: André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, “Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. by Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 365-380; and Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. by Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 381-388.

the world's leading powers, but, perhaps, first and foremost, in order to gain control over the menacingly recalcitrant masses before the situation could get out of hand.

The only reason why the North Korean “cultural revolution” of the 1950s did not spiral into the Chinese scenario, with the tremendous human and economic costs and the irreparable damage that Mao's “Cultural Revolution” had caused to the Chinese society, is, perhaps, because the North Korean state was quick to act upon the first signs of the potential crises of governmentality before it could spread beyond the walls of the movie theater by means of diffusing its wayward energy from feeding the “cinema of fits and starts” into the new attractions spearheaded by Hollywood's forays during the 1950s into widescreen processes, stereo sound, and 3D effects.

3.7 Homegrown Tinkerers

Another, perhaps, unintended consequence of the beleaguered film exhibition system was the rise of entrepreneuring domestic gadgeteers. Homegrown tinkerers, who emerged usually from the ranks of local exhibitors and included projectionists, sound engineers, and simply anyone with some sort of technical expertise and acumen, came to the rescue of the failing motion picture industry. At first, it started out of the need to address the practical issues facing almost every exhibitor which the industry itself repeatedly failed to resolve. In order to hold the apparatus coming apart at its seams together, these inadvertent innovators were initially driven by the pressure to ensure the continued delivery of audio-visual education and entertainment to the masses, lest it altogether come to a stop. Persevering in their common effort to keep the nation's

projectors running and the reels rolling, these unsung heroes were largely responsible for the survival of the country's film exhibition network as an institution at a time when it was beset by, arguably, its greatest hurdles and challenges.

Unable to materially support these efforts, the industry did what it could, mostly by means of encouragement and advice through its main print organ, film journal *Chosŏn yŏnghwa*, by promoting the industrial know-how among its more technologically savvy readers. The writings published during this period ranged from advertising the formulas for various types of adhesive compounds to repair fractured acetate, triacetate, and nitrite stock¹³⁷ to more sophisticated instructions on service procedures for projectors and sound equipment.¹³⁸ Before long, the indigenous technical talent tapped by the magazine began to generate original ingenious solutions to the various problems confronting the exhibitor, going far beyond their call of duty.

Thus, a news article in the film journal reported that a projectionist named Kim Hak-tŭk from the Haeju Cement Plant was able to build a new film projector from scrap metals, such as aluminum and magnesium, recovered from the factory. With the help of the factory's film interpreter and other colleagues, Kim succeeded in collecting all the necessary materials required for the manufacture of more than twenty complex parts of the apparatus and assembling it completely on his own in a little over forty days. As a result, the factory movie theater now proudly owned two film projectors, which allowed

¹³⁷ Kim Sŭng-ho, "Yŏnghwa p'illim e taehan myŏt kaji munje" [Some problems related to film stock], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1960): 32-37.

¹³⁸ Song Ik-su, "Yŏnghwa palsŏng changch'i esŏ chŭnp'okki ūi kojang sangt'ae wa kŭ ūi wŏnin t'amgu" [Breakdown of amplifiers in film sound equipment and finding its causes], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 2 (1961): 31-33.

for an increased number of film screenings to the delight of the factory's moviegoing employees.¹³⁹

Yet others resorted to a different kind of ingenuity filling in the gap in exhibition by directing and producing their own short films. Onsite productions would usually either fall in the category of an adaptation of some well-known literary work, such as Cho Ki-Ch'ŏn's novel *Paektusan*, which was turned into a moving slideshow by the resourceful cinema club crew at the Pon'gung Chemical Plant, or a photographed vignette on a topic related to workers' moral edification and everyday life.¹⁴⁰ The same team at Pon'gung Chemical Plant headed by a talented former film interpreter and now head of its "drama circle" (*yŏn'gŭk ssŏk'ŭl*), Chang T'ae-jun, also produced so-called "consecutive slide plays" (*yŏn'gŭk ryŏnsok sŭrait'ŭ*) in collaboration with the workers' drama circle, which were shown in the factory's movie theater daily, a feat of creative ingenuity and hard work even by the standards of the record-setting Chollima age. The factory's workers, thus, got involved in the very production of their own "films" from scriptwriting to acting to presentation of a finished product before their cheering colleagues.¹⁴¹

As one can see, the "cinema of fits and starts" had both a constructive and an integrative side to it, despite its ostensibly self-undoing quality. The straits in which the exhibitor found itself, in a sense, proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the perennial glitch, which characterized film exhibition in this period, completely and fundamentally transformed the nature of the moviegoing experience for North Korean

¹³⁹ "Yŏngsagi 'Pulgŭn kich'i' rŭl chejak" [Making "Red Base" projector], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 1 (1959): 18.

¹⁴⁰ "Kongsangjuŭi kyŏyang e sŭrait'ŭ rŭl riyong: Pon'gung hwahak kongjang kurakpŭ yŏnghwagwan esŏ" [Using slides in communist education], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 4 (1959): 31.

¹⁴¹ Kwŏn T'ak, "Han yŏnghwa pogŭp il'kun e taehan iyagi" [A story of one film distribution worker], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 5 (1959): 26-27.

audiences, repeatedly replacing intended solemnity with unintended farce. On the other hand, however, it enabled the growth of self-anointed innovators who came to the fore at this critical juncture and with their diligence and wit changed what had haunted the industry as a curse into a wellspring of hidden blessings.

Not only did they fix what the ailing industry had been trying in vain for so long to rectify – and with the little means they could muster to their disposal, – but these homegrown tinkerers, in fact, were able to accomplish much more than first meets the eye by replicating the existing technologies of the film process which had entered the country via the tutelage relationship with its Soviet overlord. As Moscow was gradually withdrawing its technical and economic support from Pyongyang over a dispute concerning the scope and extent of political liberalization, North Korea found itself in a bind, which, in a way, forced the country to reinvent a wheel. In order to hold the crumbling film apparatus together, one needed more than just a simple band-aid cure, lest the dying “patient” would expire prematurely. The surgical knife had to cut at the very heart of the problem, if the critical condition were to be reversed at all. In the absence of a functional infrastructure that would effectively address the issues which normally should not have even been the exhibitor’s concern, it was the projectionist who had to decide whether to save himself or founder. And save he did – and not just himself, but the industry at large – by promptly coming to its rescue.

Taking the faltering machine apart in order to determine where the glitch was and putting it back together entailed more than simply an act of mechanical resuscitation. Each motion required careful scrutiny and examination, which was often facilitated by meticulously detailed instructions provided by *Chosŏn yŏnghwa*, while reassembling the

remedied machine back into its original form working in reverse order called for a certain kind of shrewdness. Reconstitution of a rather sophisticated apparatus, thus, enabled its “doctor” to understand something quite important about the machine’s inner mechanics, allowing the intruder’s eye to peer at its hidden secrets and thereby effect a miraculous restoration of the “patient” back to life. It is no coincidence that the industry lingo at the time was peppered with nauseatingly endless references to the need to “demystify” the apparatus (*kigye ũi ‘sinbisŏng’*), literally by bringing out the machine’s “concealed soul,” its “secret” (*sinbi*), into the light.¹⁴²

The exercise had a number of ramifications whose importance cannot be overstated. For one thing, the new competency effectively transformed in a rather fundamental way the nature of the existing relationship with the filmmaking process itself, making the ordinary projectionist and his even less technically-qualified cohort the emblem of the country’s technological leap. The new Franklins and Edisons did not limit themselves to merely replicating the existing technologies, but, just as their American counterparts, successfully devised their own original processes and apparatuses which could have competed with any of the contemporary US and Soviet inventions developed during the “widescreen race” of the 1950s and 1960s.

Perhaps, the greatest conceit of this unpublicized, yet very real, rivalry, which, besides the US and the Soviet Union, also by extension involved South Korea and Japan for quite obvious reasons, was the development of a successful outdoor daytime projection technology. Anticipating the arrival of the so-called “third screen” at the turn of the new century, with its merging of the digital screen technologies and the Internet to produce now ubiquitous electronic displays usually deployed as a tool of commercial

¹⁴² “Yŏnghwa pogŭp esŏ ũi hyŏksin,” 9.

signage in almost every major modern metropolis, this North Korean innovation of the early 1960s epitomized the triumph of the middlebrow technological imagination. In July of 1960, *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* proudly reported the success of the inaugural public screening earlier that month of a documentary *Ch'ŏngsan-ri saramdŭl* (“People of Chongsan-ri”) using the newly developed daytime projection technology at the construction site of the Pyongyang Grand Theater which opened its doors to the public later that year (Figure 3.4).¹⁴³ The man who made this spectacle possible was a projectionist named Sin Ch'ang-gyŏng.



Figure 3.4. Daytime film projection in Pyongyang

¹⁴³ “Taenajedo ppak esŏ yŏnghwa rŭl pol su itta” [It is possible to see films in broad daylight, too], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 7 (1960): 32.

A product of a three-month-long creative effort, the new technology developed and perfected by Sin made it possible to project moving pictures in broad daylight, something of which neither the United States, nor the Soviet Union, with all their technological prowess, could boast. Not that the daytime projection technology was necessarily beyond the reach of the technological giants of the Cold War whose arms race had long since taken them spaceward, but the very fact that Pyongyang was able, on some level, even to keep up with the pace and generate new technologies on their own, rather than simply reproduce what had been passed down to them, merits our attention.

Using the principle of a photographic camera, Sin initially placed the movie projector behind a semitransparent glass screen. But, due to the short distance between the projector and the screen, the projected image, at first, was too small and all characters appeared left-handed as a result of the projector's position behind the screen. After a series of experiments, Sin finally devised a system of mirrors placed between the screen and the projector that now both magnified the image and projected it correctly onto an opaque screen. In order to avoid interference with image projection, the circumference of the screen had been coated with a thin layer of black material to absorb any direct sunlight. After several successful screenings using the new apparatus, its makers were urged to look into ways to enlarge the area of the screen beyond its current 80 cm x 60 cm without loss to image quality in response to an overwhelmingly positive popular reception of the new invention.¹⁴⁴

Devising a contraption involving an intricate system of mirrors by means of applying the principles of camera optics required a certain degree of intellectual perceptiveness, as well as both reflection and reflexivity on part of the innovator in

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 32.

regard to the possibilities of the machine, its inner workings, and the inventor's own role in the process. In a way, this creative intervention could be viewed as a self-reflexive act, even if by necessity, an inadvertent product of peering into the "soul" of the machine carrying the images of one's self, similar to the scandalously famous opening scene of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's 1929 surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou*, in which the viewer is presented with a close-up shot showing a razor held in a man's hand as it slits open a woman's eye to reveal the hidden workings of her subconscious mind.

While Sin's hand may have only been reaching for the mechanical "eye" of the movie projector, what it exposed to the North Korean audiences, perchance, was nonetheless as momentous as the can of worms spilled open by Buñuel and Dalí's directorial hand, namely, a concealed world behind the familiar reality. The encounter with the hidden mysteries of the cinematic apparatus, enabled by the "cinema of fits and starts" and further abetted by the ill-advised "demystification" campaign pushed by the industry on the verge of total bankruptcy, lifted the veil over the other, previously hidden, side of the film process which made the very photorealistic illusion of cinema so enticingly convincing and believable, calling into question, for better or for worse, the very nature of appearances.

3.8 Conclusion

As much as it may be tempting to view the two models of film spectatorship of the 1950s I have introduced in this chapter in Manichean terms as the two polar opposites, we must exercise caution not to completely and utterly separate them from one another.

What we need to recognize here is a much more complex relationship between what at a first glance would appear as two irreconcilable extremes. After all, we must not forget that it was the same people who participated in both types of film viewing – the workplace screenings and the neighborhood shows – and it was only their response that was markedly different depending on the circumstances.

I have already suggested that the nature of employer-organized film showings precluded the kind of individual response and behavior that could have been possible within a more anonymous environment of a neighborhood theater. Apart from the fact that the audience mayhem was enabled by the type of films shown in neighborhood cinemas, which often required live dubbing to add to the pile of technical incidents that inevitably accompanied almost every film presentation, I must also emphasize the more diverse social makeup of the audience of these places.

While it is true that the majority of moviegoers were young working-class men and women who attended both factory screenings and movie nights in town, as one of the contemporary accounts quoted above makes it clear, neighborhood picture-houses additionally attracted students and middle-aged clientele. Thus, the neighborhood theater gathered patrons of all ages and social stations. The influx of students and young people, as well as the absence of pestering “film promoters,” was definitely a factor in enabling neighborhood theater audiences to lower their guards in regard to public decorum, which would not have been feasible within a work setting.

In addition to that, it seems that non-workplace exhibitors also cared more about filling their theaters and providing entertainment over education than anything else. One article rebukes the administration of a local movie theater in Kaech’ŏn, South P’yŏng’an

Province, for running their daily operations haphazardly without following the plan provided by the provincial distributor for over a year. As long as the theater could report the fulfillment of its required quota for film exhibition, the administration did not seem to care much about following religiously the guidelines from above. As a result of this “negligent” approach, films rated for adult viewers were routinely shown to underage audiences, while over 40 educational documentaries and science films sent by the distributor in the beginning of the year had been collecting dust for more than six months. The article also mentions that in the nearby Sunch’ŏn county drinking among the workers of the local mobile projection unit continued to be a serious problem, resulting in ubiquitous violations of official plans and regulations, such as impromptu appearances without regard to the existing calendar of roadshow tours and last-minute replacements and random changes to the program.¹⁴⁵

Although the reported cases were exceptionally grave, they bespeak the more pervasive condition of carelessness and disregard for authority during the period in question. Even the famous Taedongmun Cinema in Pyongyang, the pride of the ongoing “cultural revolution” and the paragon of its latest achievements, was a fairly recent convert to the cause of self-reform. The conferral of its new status as a model of auto-amelioration both marked the new era of Chollima among film exhibitors and set an example for others of how to effect a miraculous self-transformation through socialist competition. The frequent disruptions during projection and replacements of films due to technical problems with prints finally came to an end in the fall of 1960 after the institution of the “Inspect one more time!” campaign (*Han bŏn tŏ pogi undong*). The theater also became more neat and tidy-looking, as a greater emphasis had been placed on

¹⁴⁵ “Yŏnghwa pogŭp saŏp esŏ hyŏksin ŭl irŭk’ija!” 3-4.

the cleanliness of its appearance, while the unfriendly customer service at the ticket office which had formerly been the subject of numerous complaints from patrons became more polite and welcoming through the successful implementation of the “Let us answer with a smile a hundred times, if they ask [us] a hundred times!” slogan (*Paekpŏn murŭmyŏn paekpŏn usŭmyŏ taedaphaja*) strategically displayed on the theater premises in full public view.¹⁴⁶

However, the newly ushered order was a rarity and a novel attraction in its own right, as one of the contemporary cartoons poignantly captures the stark contrast between Taedongmun Cinema and another popular movie-house in East Pyongyang (Figure 3.5). Showing a throng of eager patrons storming the entrance of the majestically-towering Taedongmun Cinema in juxtaposition with an abandoned, and apparently dilapidated, East Pyongyang movie theater bearing a sign on its boarded doors saying, “Temporarily closed,” this cartoon suggests a sense of sarcastic astonishment and disbelief as shown through the eyes of two incredulous onlookers placed to the edge of each of the two frames. In the first image, presented as a frame of a two-shot filmstrip, one man asks another whether the closure is due to the lack of patronage. The answer makes itself obvious in the next frame below the first one in which they both literally drop their jaws at the accuracy of the man’s conjecture, as the two fellows witness the sight of what promises to be a full house at the Taedongmun Cinema that night.

The situation with defiant exhibitors points to a certain tension during this period between the intentions of the state seeking to make the cinema the instrument of political education and control over the “uncultured” masses, on the one hand, and the industry’s

¹⁴⁶ “Ch’ŏllima chagŏp’pan ŭi yŏngye rŭl chinin yŏnghwagwandŭl” [Film theaters with honors of the Chollima work brigade], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 8 (1961): 17.

self-perceived need to remain solvent in a capital-intensive business of film production, distribution, and exhibition, on the other. After all, neighborhood cinemas were still largely only operating on the market principle and had to turn a profit in order to, at least, cover their operational costs. Studios and distributors, too, at the very minimum, needed to redeem their production and distribution costs in order to make more films for the state.

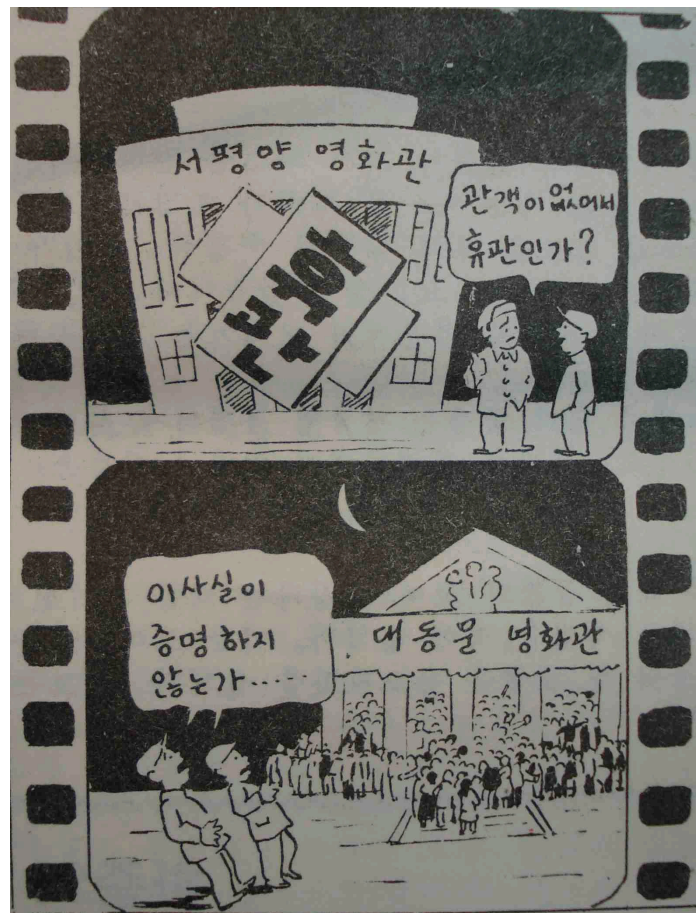


Figure 3.5. Everyone goes to Taedongmun Cinema

As the government pressed ahead with “expanded production and maximum saving” on the cinematic front, returns on costly investments into the production of motion pictures became a matter of urgent concern for all departments of the nation’s

film network. Catering to the popular taste for what I have called “socialist vaudeville” was, in a way, a necessary response, if temporary, to the predicament of the film industry learning to survive on its own. What it produced, however, was a type of public conformism defined by a remarkable adaptability to the exigencies of a particular situation. By the 1960s, it was almost second nature for the “chameleon spectator” forged by the film industry itself during the previous decade to move faultlessly between public compliance and self-indulgence depending on the circumstances right under the watchful, but largely powerless, eye of the disciplining socialist state.

If the new class of homegrown tinkerers epitomized the emerging powers of critical thinking and the ability for self-reflexivity on part of North Korean audiences through riveting their collective gaze always hungry for spectacle to the innards of the farcically self-undoing apparatus and manipulating its hidden structures to refashion and reanimate the ailing machine, the self-deceiving state, instead, was prone to displace the very same ills beleaguering its film industry onto its South Korean counterpart. In this vein, a centerfold cartoon from *Hwa(l)sal* presents a caricaturized image of the South Korean capital Seoul trampled down and pervaded by the deleterious American cultural and military presence (Figure 3.6).

In an ironic twist, the representation is almost a direct inversion of the North Korean street we have analyzed at the end of the previous chapter, in which all the unseemly sores on the face of the social fabric are now conveniently linked to the corrupting American influence evident in what we could call the travesty of “capitalist vaudeville.” It is noteworthy that the movie theater occupies a prominent place in this distorting mirror portrayal of Self through Other. The carnival mirror device is hardly

accidental, as it merely serves to magnify the externalized self-image and project it onto the metaphorical body of the familiar Other. Sometimes, it is simply easier to see one's own flaws in the distorted Other, whether this Other is a faithful reflection of Self or its twisted shadow. In either case, externalization remains key to the success of the whole venture.

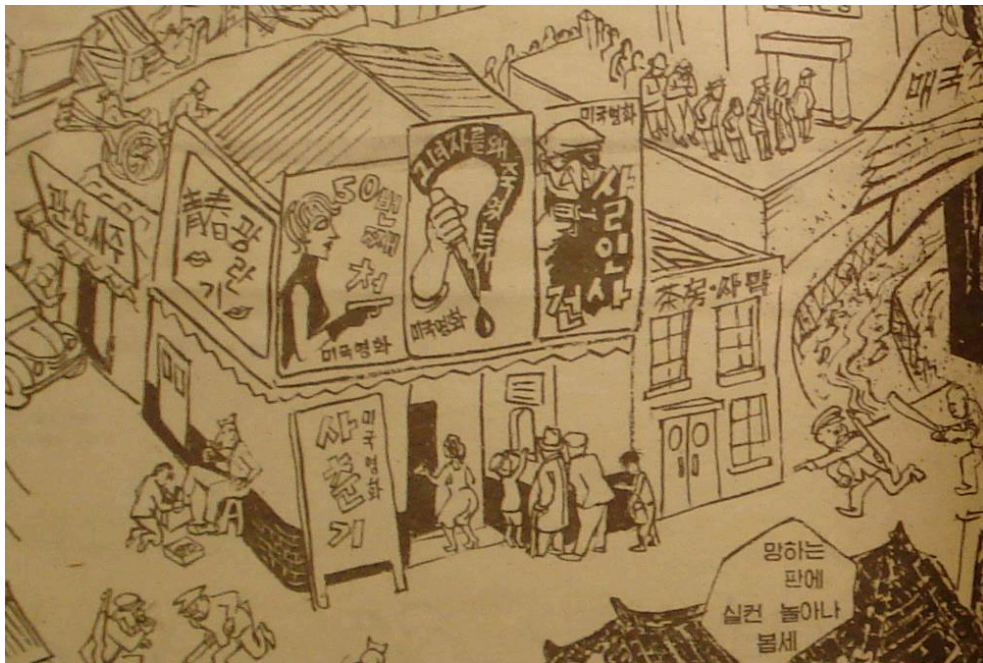


Figure 3.6. A South Korean movie theater

Understanding film spectatorship in North Korea during this period has important implications beyond the field of film history and cultural studies. The ability for tactical conformism, which our focus on film-viewing practices during the 1950s and early 1960s has brought into sharp relief, is a critical discovery whose heuristic value cannot be overstated. It is paramount precisely because the phenomenon itself is hardly confined to the physical space of this one particular cultural institution. Once in place, before one

knows, its invisible “tentacles” will have extended far into the realm of everydayness, into all kinds of relations between the individual and the state not necessarily mediated by the medium of cinema. While all this time we may have been speaking about the “chameleon” *spectator*, there is no reason not to think that the “chameleon” in the person would not remain after the spectator’s hat has been exchanged for that of any other social role the individual inevitably adopts throughout his or her life. After all, every *other* society that tried to build a version of socialist utopia, be it in Eastern Europe, Latin America, or Asia, all without fail developed their own unique kinds of conformism. Yet, every time the wind of change would blow over them, all without exception would adapt to the new social, political, and economic order, just like a chameleon would blend in into its new environment.

4. A Tale of Two Laughters: Yun Chae-yŏng and His Forgotten Comedy

4.1 Introduction

Nineteen fifty-eight marks an important year for North Korean cinema. In April of that year the national film studio completed its first comedy film, which was then released with much fanfare to the country's big screens. In the months preceding the grand premiere, *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* journal had been at the forefront of a major publicity campaign building up the hype around the event with unprecedented coverage of the picture's production process, including interviews with the film's cast and director. No other film prior to that and few since had enjoyed as much attention from the industry and the critical establishment before the picture was actually released as this one had. Yun Chae-yŏng's *Uri sawi, uri myŏnŭri* ("Our son-in-law, our daughter-in-law," 1958) was different from all previous productions in that in the eleven years of the studio's history it was Pyongyang's first genuine attempt at creating its own comedy. With undisciplined audiences routinely laughing in all the wrong places, this milestone production put the state's ability to lure its wayward patrons into submission to the power of the image rather than subduing the image to their own fancy to its first major test.

Unfortunately, until now we knew nothing about this initial attempt simply because no record of it seemed to have survived in extant sources available to the historian of North Korean cinema. While a small number of South Korean film scholars occasionally include the title in their filmographies of early North Korean movies under different production years and genres, there was not really much more information about

the film or its makers until this research had been finally completed. Contemporary North Korean sources, on the other hand, fail to mention this historical production altogether, starting their official genealogy, instead, with a completely different film made almost half a decade later.¹⁴⁷

The curious invisibility of this important historical text has triggered my investigation that ultimately led to the discovery of the missing film (along with a number of other important films from the 1950s which had been presumed to be lost), as well as a number of other fascinating materials pertaining to the identity of its creator whose name also had been forgotten. The mystery gets even more intriguing, when we find out that the director in question was no small fish and that his film had received much spotlight at the time.

This chapter makes an argument that the disappearance of both the filmmaker and his text was no mere coincidence, but is only a small, yet absolutely critical, detail in a much larger story of the struggle between a number of different forces over the trajectory of North Korean cinema in the long term – the struggle that was part and parcel of the rapidly changing politics, both domestic and international, and the imminent rise of Kim Il Sung’s personality cult. I argue that Yun’s unfortunate fate and the fate of his film represent a failed possibility of a director-centered cinema in North Korea in the 1950s, a possibility that was, arguably, finally realized some twenty years later with the notorious disappearance of an iconic South Korean film director, Shin Sang-ok, and his wife, actress Choi Eun-hee, in 1978 while visiting Hong Kong and then their reappearance in the North as alleged victims of a high-profile abduction.

¹⁴⁷ For example, see: Kim Yŏng. *Hŭigŭk yŏnghwa wa usŭm* [Comedy films and laughter] (P’yŏngyang: Munhak yesul chonghap ch’ulp’ansa, 1993): 19. The author claims that North Korea’s first comedy film was a 1962 production of *Sanullim* (“Rumblings of a Mountain”).

Whatever the true circumstances of this well-known historical episode, Shin has been commonly credited with a more or less successful attempt at raising North Korean cinema to international standards during his career in the DPRK from 1978 until 1986 through his reputation as an established film *auteur*.¹⁴⁸ While Yun – the main protagonist of this chapter – cannot be called an *auteur* in his own right, given the man’s rather short-lived career, his professional trajectory suggests, in my opinion, a certain direction for the country’s cinema, as a whole, which was foreclosed at that particular junction.

The possibility of creating an *auteur* cinema in North Korea in the late 1950s did not materialize, because Yun failed his test as a “court jester” – the comedy he had made pleased no one, and he never got a second chance to prove his worth to the regime. Instead of holding up a carnival mirror to his audience to make them laugh, Yun tried to avoid the trick of distortion, and that was his biggest mistake. It was the unforeseen revelatory power of Yun’s banished film, I argue, that precipitated both his film’s and his own demise and historiographic effacement.¹⁴⁹

4.2 Yun Chae-yŏng and the Rise of *Auteur* Theory

As the country was being swept by a jesting fever, the state sought to contain the entropy of self-fashioned pranksters and jokers by taking the matter into its own hands and appointing a “chief clown” over them all to run the show. It is little surprise that the

¹⁴⁸ For more, see: Steven Chung, *Split Screen Korea: Shin Sang-ok and Postwar Cinema* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

¹⁴⁹ Ted Hughes in his recent work on post-Liberation South Korean film and literature turns to the questions of disavowal, effacement, and invisibility of the past, building on Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “distribution of the sensible.” My inquiry, in turn, is motivated by a similar concern for the historiographic invisibility of the film as a “lost” object. For more, see: Theodore Hughes, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom’s Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012): 1-3.

choice would fall on a talented young man who had been at the center of the rapidly growing film industry in North Korea from its very first days. It was he who was now charged with an important task of directing the nation's first comedy film. The state studio had a good reason to entrust the mission to that particular individual and no other, and a closer look at the man's personal background and professional credentials will make that choice abundantly clear.

Yun Chae-yŏng was born in 1919, an important year in modern Korean history on account of the March 1 independence movement, which contributed to the relaxation of some of the harshest laws imposed on Korea by Japan after the country's annexation in 1910.¹⁵⁰ Yun grew up in the heyday of the "cultural policy" rule of the Japanese government general in Korea, when Koreans were allowed limited opportunities to develop their own culture and arts. While he was still in school, Yun discovered a passion for cinema, but Korea had no film school of its own he could go to. This, however, did not stop the young cinephile from South Chŏlla province from pursuing his interest on his own through reading books and film magazines he could get his hands on. It is then, Yun claims, that he decided that he wanted to become a film director. Yet, Yun's father was against the young man's choice of career, insisting that he go to medical school, instead, to become a doctor. Yun was steadfast in his decision, even though his family refused to pay for his film school education. A compromise was finally reached to send Yun to

¹⁵⁰ All information we have on Yun Chae-yŏng comes from his student file at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK), which he attended between 1948 and 1950, in the author's personal collection. Among other things, his file includes a short autobiography, which served as the source of this account and which explains some gaps in the narrative.

Japan to study politics and economics at Tokyo's prestigious Waseda University, which he attended between 1938 and 1942.¹⁵¹

The decision to go to Japan turned out to be a blessing in disguise for the aspiring filmmaker, since living in Tokyo allowed Yun to spend all his free time at one of the film studios doing odd jobs while learning about the filmmaking craft.¹⁵² Unfortunately, Yun could not secure a permanent position for himself with the studio upon graduating and, as a result, had to make his way back to Korea in 1942. He was more successful in Korea, however, where he was able to get hired by a film production company in Seoul as an assistant director. After the country's liberation in 1945, Yun joined the newly formed Federation of Film Workers as a member of its central committee and worked briefly under the U.S. military occupation, before he moved to Pyongyang the following year.¹⁵³

As a member of the Korean Communist Party, which he joined in February of 1946, he was made a deputy head of the temporary film studio in the North in addition to his continuing role as a film director. In October of 1946, he was elected into the central committee of the North Korean Federation of Film Workers. When the state film studio was established in early 1947, Yun was made chair of its party committee. Perhaps, owing to his prominent place in North Korean film and politics, Yun was one of several students the government sent to the Soviet Union for further education. He started his training in Leningrad in 1947 at the Leningrad Institute of Film Engineers, but after his first year he was able to arrange a transfer to the more prestigious All-Union Institute of

¹⁵¹ Author's personal archive.

¹⁵² Unfortunately, Yun's records from his years at Waseda University still remain unavailable to us today.

¹⁵³ Author's personal archive. Many leftists intellectuals, including Yun, chose to go north after the Liberation, which they regarded politically as more progressive and less dependent of foreign control.

Cinematography in Moscow, or VGIK, considered to be the country's top film school at the time.¹⁵⁴

The three years spent in the Soviet Union were a very special time for Yun. Finally, his childhood dream came true and he could study at some of the world's best film schools and learn from top Soviet filmmakers firsthand. But, most importantly, Yun had a unique opportunity to work directly with two leading film directors at the famous Mosfilm studio – Abram Room and Vsevolod Pudovkin – during his two-year stay in the Soviet capital. Working under Pudovkin on a biopic about the father of Russian aerodynamics, *Zhukovsky* (1950), the North Korean apprentice was able to learn how to shoot on color stock in addition to being the director's right hand throughout all stages of filmmaking, including pre- and post-production, acting rehearsals with the film cast, and editing. Before coming to the Soviet Union, Yun had directed five documentary films in the North and was now ready, in Pudovkin's own words, to take on full responsibility for any major production.¹⁵⁵

Both Japan and the Soviet Union, where Yun received his informal and formal training, had a long tradition of placing a special emphasis on the role of the film director. It is noteworthy that Yun's return to Korea in the early 1950s coincided with a historical moment when new ideas about the director's role as a privileged author of a film text began to take shape in Western film criticism. The *auteur* theory, or the *politique des auteurs*, advocated by French film director and critic François Truffaut and a close-knit group of allies associated with the work of *Cahiers du Cinéma* was, in many ways, a product of France's opening to American films after the ban imposed by the German

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

Occupation had been lifted with the end of World War II. Far from a unified theory of film authorship, the *politique des auteurs* sought a deeper underlying structure and coherence to a body of what were often rather diverse films in the figure of the film director. With its growing popularity on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the new theory offered competing criteria for deciding whether this or that particular director should be counted as an *auteur* or not.

While many have sought to define an *auteur* through stylistic unity or thematic continuity of his output, implying an existence of a certain “archi-film” of which every actual film an *auteur* makes is only a partial manifestation of that one hidden meta-text, Peter Wollen has argued, instead, that the *auteur* theory does not need to limit itself to acclaiming the director as the ultimate source of a film, but rather implies an operation of decipherment, revealing authors where none had been perceived before. While the European model of an author in the cinema as the main creative center, with open artistic aspirations and full control over his films, continues to linger on, historically speaking, *auteur* theory has grown out of a process of reevaluation of those filmmakers (and their work) who had not been previously regarded in this way.

Wollen thus suggests that just as an *auteur* is a critic’s discovery and creation, so is the meaning of his oeuvre a product of an *a posteriori* construction. Likening an *auteur* film to a musical performance rather than a musical composition which exists *a priori* on paper, Wollen argues that it is precisely the structure that the *auteur* analysis disengages from the film.¹⁵⁶ He further elaborates on that point:

¹⁵⁶ Peter Wollen, “From *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema: The Auteur Theory*” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 519-535. (Added emphasis is mine.)

The structure is associated with a single director, an individual, not because he has played the role of artist, expressing himself or his own vision in the film, but because *it is through the forces of his preoccupations that an unconscious, unintended meaning can be decoded in the film, usually to the surprise of the individual involved*. The film is not a communication, but an artefact which is unconsciously structured in a certain way. *Auteur* analysis does not consist of retracing a film to its origins, to its creative source. It consists of tracing a structure (not a message) within the work, which can then *post factum* be assigned to an individual, the director, on empirical grounds.¹⁵⁷

Thus, in Wollen's view, any film can be a network of different statements, crossing and contradicting each other, elaborated into a final 'coherent' version, which hides and masks deeper meaning behind the 'film façade.' An *auteur*, then, is an individual who skillfully negotiates the polyphony of all these competing voices, although he may not be always able to shape the meaning to his liking, given the industrial, commercial, and political constraints of film production. As my analysis of the film will show, Yun's forgotten comedy tries to negotiate a number of conflicting ideas about the place and role of laughter in the country's emerging new cinema in the *auteuristic* vein suggested by Wollen.

Of course, the fact that one was put through an apprentice system in itself does not warrant calling that person an *auteur*, yet, at the same time, the formative influences and the environment cannot be simply brushed away. Few people in North Korea had the opportunity for professional development that Yun had. Between 1948 and 1959, only seventeen North Koreans studied at VGIK and only six of them, including Yun, specialized in film directing, while others received more technical training as cameramen and screenwriters, a trend that becomes reversed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when North Korea begins to send its students to the Soviet Union once again after an almost

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 532.

twenty-year hiatus. It is also then that Shin Sang-ok makes his appearance in the North. A new interest in training film directors rather than film technicians around that time that we see in a dramatically increased number of students sent to VGIK is, then, far from accidental.

It should also be noted that the majority of students who attended the prestigious film school in Moscow in the 1950s never returned to their homeland. The rise of Kim Il Sung's personality cult and his purges of political opponents triggered a wave of defections among North Korean students studying abroad. Andrei Lankov mentions that a dozen North Korean students from the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography applied for Soviet asylum, which they were granted, when they refused to follow the orders of their government to go back as a precautionary measure against future incidents of defections.¹⁵⁸

As Brian Myers and others have shown, Kim's personality cult was largely the work of one man – Han Sörya – who in the 1950s ascended to the position of chairman of the influential North Korean Federation of Literature and Art (*Puk Chosön munhak yesul ch'ongdongmaeng*) and produced panegyric literary fiction about the Great Leader that became the basis of his growing cult.¹⁵⁹ Interestingly, Kim's ascent to charismatic power was concurrent with a campaign to raise the importance of screenwriters vis-à-vis the role of film director. Beginning in the early 1960s, increasing attention is being paid to training an army of skilled screenwriters, while the screenplay (*ssinario*) becomes both

¹⁵⁸ Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of Destalinization, 1956* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004): 193-195.

¹⁵⁹ Brian Myers, *Han Sörya and North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1994): 135-142. Also see: Han, Chung-mo, *Han Söl-ya ūi ch'angjak yŏn'gu* [A study of Han Sörya's work] (Pyongyang, 1959).

the blueprint for a future film and the repository of its meaning and message, which, in turn, allows us to trace authorship through the screenwriter to the Party itself as the ultimate source of all meaning.

Directing, therefore, becomes synonymous with executing an *a priori* existing screenplay as faithfully as possible to its original source, which is now wrested from the film director – a concept that is deeply antithetical even to the socialist realist theory of art which still placed great value on individual authorship and allowed such *auteurs* as Andrei Tarkovsky to emerge. I argue that Yun’s downfall was both symbolic and symptomatic of a very deliberate process of stripping the film director of his traditional prerogatives and turning him into a kind of a figurehead in the filmmaking process.

4.3 Newcomers to Comedy

The country’s film journal, *Chosŏn yŏnghwa*, launched in the summer of 1957 solicited submissions of a variety of artwork from its readers, starting from fully developed screenplays to any kind of art illustrations. Included in the list were “puppet plays” (*inhyŏnggŭk*), “satirical stories” (*mandam*), “witty stories” (*chaedam*), “ventriloquist plays” (*pokhwagŭk*), “skits” (*ch’ongŭk*), and “comic strips” (*ryŏnsokhwa*). The journal, thus, invited its readers to put their amateur merrymaking into certain forms amenable to cinematic adaptation and representation. Encouraging popular creativity, the journal, of course, also acted as censor and judge of what was ultimately appropriate for public display and what was not. In the meantime, work was under way on producing the country’s inaugural comedy. While some comic elements had previously appeared in one

earlier production – a film musical *Sinhon pubu* (“The Newlyweds,” 1955) – no genuine comedy had been made in North Korea in over a decade since the film studio’s founding in early 1947.

The director himself as well as the majority of the cast were also newcomers to film comedy. In fact, some of the actors had never acted in a film before and had to learn the ropes of film acting on the fly. In an article penned by Yun for the film journal under the title “Finding the Secret of Laughter,” the director admits that he is “neither a philosopher of laughter, nor a witty comedian,” giving all the credit for the laughter generated by the film to the screenwriting department. While in bourgeois cinema, he writes, the comedy genre often relies on exciting the audience’s peripheral nerves, making them laugh by reflex rather than through reflection, in his film a different variety of the comic is employed which does not depend as much on exaggeration, but makes the spectator think, instead, giving rise to “healthy laughter, merry laughter, optimistic laughter” (*kŏnjŏnhan usŭm, myŏngnanghan usŭm, rakch’ŏnjŏgin usŭm*).¹⁶⁰

While Yun at first seems to situate the comic chiefly in the textual, that is, the screenplay, he then moves on to point out that he was able to discover the comic also in the actors’ performance itself – their “intonation and movements” (*ŏgyang kwa tongjak*) – and his job as a director was primarily to ensure that in all the comic scenes the actors’ breath should be in sync with each other, prefiguring an important debate of the 1960s on rhythm and musicality in film comedy, a debate he would not, unfortunately, be part of. Coordinating and synchronizing the performances, in fact, he insists, is so critical that, if it were not executed properly, the comic situation could not be produced. The director’s

¹⁶⁰ Yun Chae-yŏng, “Usŭm ŭi pigyŏl ŭl ch’ajasŏ: ‘Uri sawi, uri myŏnŭri’ rŭl yŏnch’ulhago” [In search of the secret of laughter: directing “Our son-in-law, our daughter-in-law”], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 4 (1958): 16.

secret, then, he concludes, is making certain that his actors are like “snipers who never miss their target” (*paekpalpaekchung ŭi chŏgyŏksu*), always in the moment and always aware of their surroundings and other people.¹⁶¹

Shortly before unfavorable reviews of the film began to arrive at the end of 1958, Yun had written a two-part article for *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* on film directing. In his essay, addressed to the “cinophile in the audience” (*yŏnghwa rŭl aehohanŭn kwangaektŭl*), he starts out by emphasizing that the director plays a “key and decisive role” (*haeksimjŏgigo kyŏlchŏngjŏgin yŏkhal*) in the filmmaking process.¹⁶² While Yun acknowledges that ultimately the director is there to fulfill the Party policy and that the screenplay provides the conceptual and artistic kernel of the future film, it is clear from his detailed description of the director’s role that it is the director and no one else who is essentially behind the whole endeavor, coordinating between the various individuals and departments and translating the idea and its literary source into an actual motion picture. In fact, the director’s (in)visible hand is very much present at all stages of filmmaking, from reworking the screenplay into a shooting script and casting actors to working with art and set designers, cinematographers, editors, and sound engineers.¹⁶³

It is noteworthy that Yun’s piece on the art of directing is not only unique among the materials published by the film journal at the time, but also in that it anticipates many important discussions of the 1960s, which is the subject of the next chapter, before they emerged into the discursive space. While Yun appears to have had many of the makings

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁶² Yun Chae-yŏng, “Yŏnghwa yŏnch’ul e taehayo (sang): Yŏnch’ul chagŏp ŭl chungsim ũro” [On film directing (part 1)], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 8 (1958): 32.

¹⁶³ Yun Chae-yŏng, “Yŏnghwa yŏnch’ul e taehayo (ha)” [On film directing (part 2)], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 10 (1958): 27-29.

of a potential film *auteur*, that alone, perhaps, would not have been sufficient to bring him down, given the contemporary political climate in North Korea, without his involvement in the actual production of the controversial film. But before we turn to the film, we must say a few words about the historical context within which *Uri sawi, uri myŏnŭri* emerged, which is key to understanding what exactly went wrong with director Yun's comedy.

4.4 The Anti-Soviet Turn

On July 3 and 4, 1956, a fifth-year student at the Moscow State Conservatory, Kim Ch'o-wŏn, a North Korean national studying music in Moscow, paid two visits to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The reason for this unusual appearance at the Party headquarters was to appeal to the higher authorities regarding a recent incident involving the North Korean government. A few days prior to that, several officials from his home country had met with Kim and three other North Korean students, urging them to withdraw from their programs and promptly return to Korea. According to Kim, the officials appeared rather concerned over a number of recent cases of North Korean students marrying Soviet citizens while in the Soviet Union. The officials told the students, who all had Soviet spouses, that the government had sent them to the Soviet Union for schooling, not debauchery. The charges seemed unfair and unfounded to Kim, who had only dated one girl since his arrival in the Soviet Union and to whom he was now married. The prosecutors accused the young men of moral depravity and promiscuity, likening them to Kim Yŏl, who had been convicted not that

long ago as a traitor and sentenced to 15 years in prison.¹⁶⁴

Also on July 4, the students gathered to protest their recall on such grounds as marriage to Soviet citizens. Kim had already been to his country's embassy in Moscow in an attempt to appeal his case to their ambassador, but his plea went unanswered. It was then that he decided to knock on the door of the powerful Central Committee in a hope that Moscow would intervene on his behalf. The archival record of this meeting indicates that Kim had been advised to comply with his government's request and return to North Korea, leaving his wife and his two-year-old daughter behind.¹⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the archives do not mention what became of Kim Ch'o-wŏn and whether he had to go back to Korea without his wife and child.

The incident, however, was not an isolated one, as the next few years witnessed a series of defections among North Korean students over fears of political reprisals against them and their families in the midst of a continuing anti-Soviet purge back home. And the expatriate students had a good reason to fear going back – in the new political climate their marriage to Soviet nationals could only have played against them. The Soviet ambassador to Pyongyang, V.I. Ivanov, made the following entry in his diary on May 29, 1956:

In the conversation I had with Kim Sŭng-hwa, he told me that he came back from a trip to Hŭngnam with Kim Il Sung. During the trip, he had told Kim Il Sung that the propaganda policy pursued by the C[entral] C[ommittee] of the K[orean] W[orkers'] P[arty] raises some serious doubts. Under the guise of the struggle against dogmatism, a struggle against Soviet influence on Korea is being led. ... In regard to Koreans

¹⁶⁴ The above account is based on the record of conversation with Kim Ch'o-wŏn at the Central Committee of the CPSU on July 10, 1956. RGANI, Obschii ordeal TsK KPSS, 1953-1966 gody (Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, The General Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1953-1966), iedinitsa khraneniia №410, list 197-198 (Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 2000).

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 197-198.

who arrived from the USSR, a policy aimed at isolating them and creating an atmosphere which makes it impossible for them to work [in Korea] is being pursued. That is why many valuable cadres leave the DPRK. Kim Sŭng-hwa herein noted that [back] in the USSR, they would no doubt tell the truth about the anomalous situation in the DPRK.¹⁶⁶

The following day ambassador Ivanov made another entry in his diary after a meeting with North Korea's deputy minister of agriculture, Kim Cha-ŭk – another Soviet Korean occupying a high government office – who came to him for advice about whether he and his family should leave the country. The reason for his doubts was because Kim Il Sung had spoken of him as “Hegai's [Hō Ka-i] protégé and incompetent worker”¹⁶⁷ at the December plenum, after which Kim Cha-ŭk was demoted from several positions he held. Shortly after that, a few members of the KWP Central Committee approached him with suggestions that he leave the country. However, the policy toward him was then quickly reversed, and he was called in four times to the Central Committee by three different party bigwigs, including Kim Il Sung himself, and personally asked to stay. Kim was even offered the opportunity to have his family sent to the Soviet Union for medical treatment at the government's expense on the condition that they do not leave permanently.¹⁶⁸

Few Soviet Koreans, like Kim Cha-ŭk, had the luxury of actually considering

¹⁶⁶ Soviet ambassador V.I. Ivanov's diary for May 17 through June 1, 1956, entry for May 29, RGANI, Obshchii ordeal TsK KPSS, 1953-1966 gody [Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, The General Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1953-1966], iedinitsa khraneniia №410, list 192 (Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 2000).

¹⁶⁷ Alexei Ivanovich Hō Kai (Hegai in Russian) (1908-1953) was a Soviet political operative in North Korea and leader of the Soviet Korean faction. He was second vice chairman of the DPRK Politburo from 1949 until he was purged. He allegedly committed suicide in Pyongyang. For more, see: Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea 1945-1960* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

¹⁶⁸ Ivanov's diary, RGANI, 191-193.

return to the Soviet Union, because they had kept their Soviet citizenship, but for many more who had taken North Korean passports that route was closed forever. Marriage to foreign nationals, then, put North Korean students in a real bind, since their loyalty was now called into question, and their sudden recall only gave the more reason for concern.

4.5 Laughing at the Wrong Guy

It was in the middle of this ongoing political scandal that Pyongyang released the film. North Korea's first romantic comedy, *Uri sawi, uri myŏnŭri* tells a story of two young people – Yŏng-sik (played by Cha Cha-ryŏng), a crane operator at a construction site in Pyongyang, and Sun-hŭi (played by Kim Hyŏng-suk), a salesgirl in a toys section in one of North Korean capital's department stores – who are about to get married. The film opens with Yŏng-sik's father getting a letter from his son in the middle of the harvest festival celebration on their collective farm (Figure 4.1). As the villagers dressed in traditional Korean garb burst into joyful dance and song amid sky-high mounds of rice, Yŏng-sik's father is at a loss as to whether he can leave the farm now during its busiest season. But the chairman of the farm settles the matter by insisting that he go to Pyongyang and sign a contract for new farming equipment on his behalf.

The film then cuts to a bustling scene inside the department store where Yŏng-sik's fiancée, Sun-hŭi, works (Figure 4.2). Yŏng-sik brings her a letter he received from his father saying that he would be arriving in the capital shortly to meet the bride and wonders if Sun-hŭi has yet heard back from her mother. When the groom first approaches the counter at which Sun-hŭi works, she is nowhere to be seen. But as he starts talking to

her colleague, a pretty Western doll emerges from under the countertop followed by Sun-hŭi holding it as if to suggest a metonymic correspondence between the girl and the doll (Figure 4.3). The couple is then abruptly interrupted by a brusque customer who shoves Yŏng-sik aside and asks Sun-hŭi to show him some toy. When the man and his wife leave, the protagonists resume their conversation only to be interrupted again by another couple of more polite customers this time. As Yŏng-sik takes off, the man asks Sun-hŭi for a doll set of Ch'unhyang and Idoryŏng, the characters of the quintessential Korean love tale, often dubbed Korea's Romeo and Juliet (Figure 4.4).



Figure 4.1. Yŏng-sik's father on the farm



Figure 4.2. The department store

The opening scene in the department store, in fact, anticipates what is about to unfold: the young couple's marriage plans become frustrated by another unrequited suitor – Sun-hŭi's boss – who wants to get rid of Yŏng-sik and marry the girl himself, but the two lovers eventually get back together and sort everything out, just as Ch'unhyang and Idoryŏng happily reunite after all their tests and trials in the Korean traditional story.

After all the suspense and tension, the film concludes with a happy ending, culminating in a closing scene in which the two protagonists and their parents drive off to their wedding in the countryside.



Figure 4.3. Sun-hŭi at work



Figure 4.4. A doll set of Ch'unhyang and Idoryŏng

A classic comedy of errors, *Uri sawi, uri myŏnŭri* takes the viewer through a series of comic situations, amusing mix-ups, and fateful misunderstandings, which accounts for much of the humorous character of the film. However, the film falls short of being simply an innocuous comedy of mistaken identity. While there is certainly that aspect to it, the film also contains a strong satirical element that we cannot overlook. I would like to argue, however, there is more than just satire at stake here, which makes the text more subversive than first meets the eye – something that official criticism could not openly comment on, but only indirectly allude to.

At a first glance, the film seems to offset the political gloom of factional witch-hunts enshrouding the North Korean capital by representing the city as a desirable place

of economic growth, opportunity, and social justice. Suk-Young Kim has argued that the role of Pyongyang as a staged theatrical production constantly enacting a utopian vision of socialist paradise is central to the regime's power politics in maintaining a firm grip on the country. She writes, "While it is true that Pyongyang as an actual site is the source of Pyongyang as theatrical illusion, the real city is reciprocally reenvisioned and consequently reshaped by the image created on stage; in fact, the imagined onstage city served as the blueprint for the real city as it was conceived."¹⁶⁹

In the film, Pyongyang is portrayed as a rapidly growing and rebuilding modern metropolis bustling with commerce where young people come to work, study, and fall in love. The vibrancy of this urban utopia is conveyed by means of a moving camera which shows the city in motion with the help of numerous pans, tracking, and crane shots, as well as through movement within the shot. Whether it is the scenes on the street or inside the department store, the camera rarely stops moving.

But, most importantly, the city is depicted as the place of romance where young people meet and fall in love. Yŏng-sik and Sun-hŭi go on long walks, hold hands, and longingly look into each other's eyes, as they dream about their future together, while gazing into other families' windows hoping that one day they will, too, have children of their own (Figure 4.5, 4.6). And, in the end, they, indeed, are on their way to get married and fulfill all their dreams, suggesting the centrality of Pyongyang in the national amorous geography (Figure 4.7). Unlike the North Korean students who married Soviet women and refused to return, our protagonists quite happily find their love at home. Although the film makes no explicit reference to that historical context, it would be naïve

¹⁶⁹ Suk-Young Kim, "Springtime for Kim Il-sung in Pyongyang: City on Stage, City as Stage" in *TDR: The Drama Review* 51:2 (2007): 26.

to ignore its significance here. The more so that it was not just North Korean students not coming back, but also Soviet Koreans in the country desperately seeking to leave.



Figure 4.5. Baby dreams



Figure 4.6. Yǒng-sik and Sun-hŭi on a stroll

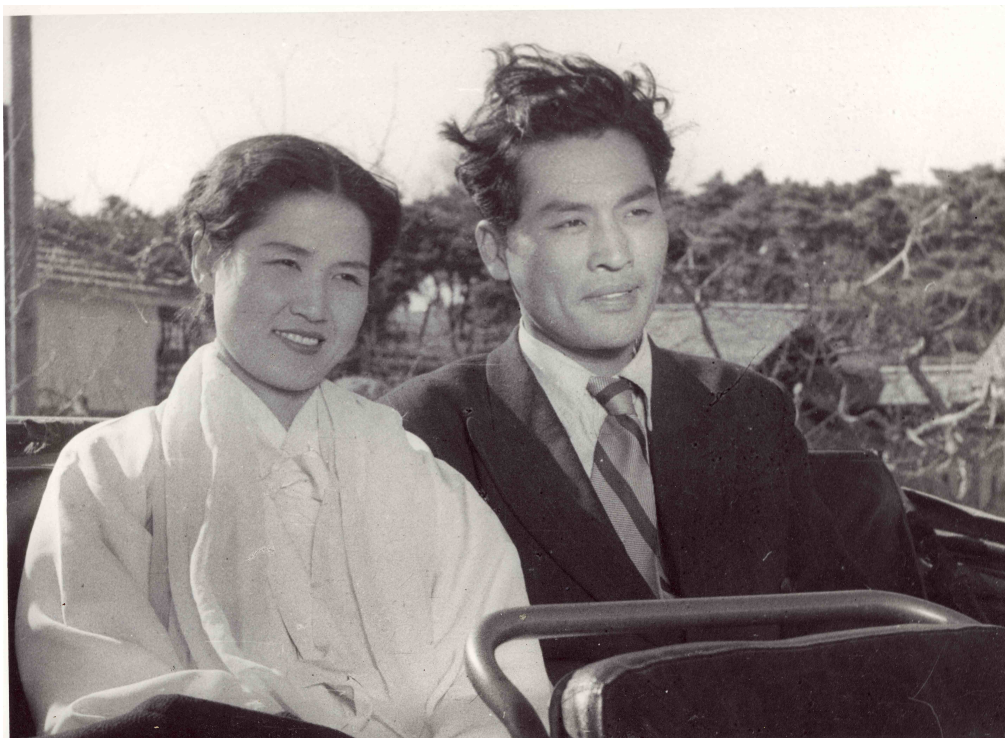


Figure 4.7. Yǒng-sik and Sun-hŭi on their way to get married

Pyongyang needed some kind of propaganda piece to discourage anyone with Soviet connections from rejecting or challenging the increasingly autocratic regime. On the surface, Yun's seemingly innocuous comedy was supposed to do just that. And yet, despite all the utopian bliss the movie was meant to project, a creeping shadow of gloom continues to hang over Pyongyang shown by Yun. The city is as much filled with danger as it is brimming with opportunity – a flipside of rapid modernization, one might say. Danger lurks almost everywhere the protagonists go – the street, the workplace, and even close to home – whether it is the cars, the machinery, or the unwanted suitor following on their heels (Figure 4.8, 4.9, 4.10). And while all that could have been used for a purely comic effect, that possibility was forfeited when the director decided to make the film's antagonist, Ch'ang Chin, Sun-hŭi's boss at the department store who is scheming to upset her plans to marry Yŏng-sik, a "serious," rather than "funny" character.



Figure 4.8. Dangerous streets



Figure 4.9. Yŏng-sik tries to fix the crane

Unlike Sun-hŭi's mother, for example, whose negative character traits, such as arrogance and materialism, which are associated with the old society and branded as petty

bourgeois, are satirically exaggerated, while her good intentions are never really called into question, Ch'ang Chin, by contrast, is portrayed as lacking that good core altogether. But, more importantly, whereas Sun-hŭi's mother is continuously comicalized throughout the film, the spectator laughs at Ch'ang Chin only at the very end, when his schemes to bad-mouth Yŏng-sik before Sun-hŭi's mother and mislead her to believe that he is her daughter's real fiancé fail. But even then we laugh at the situation in which he finds himself rather than at him as a character. Apart from Ch'ang Chin's very last appearance, where his performance is truly comic, there is hardly any comic exaggeration in regard to his character elsewhere in the film, making him thus look more menacing for the most part than funny (Figure 4.11).



Figure 4.10. Ch'ang Chin spies on the couple



Figure 4.11. The comic portrayal of Ch'ang Chin

Whatever Yun's motivation was in representing the negative character in such a way, it seems to have worked against him in the end. If Sun-hŭi's mother repents when she realizes her mistakes and asks Yŏng-sik and his father for forgiveness for mistreating

them earlier, Ch'ang Chin shows no sign of remorse over all the wrongs he has committed. And his wrongs are many: not only did he try to drive a wedge between Sun-hŭi and Yŏng-sik and lie to Sun-hŭi's mother, but he is also guilty of more serious economic crimes running the department store. To curry favor with Sun-hŭi's mother after he almost kicks her out of the store, when she shows up there with a live duck looking for Sun-hŭi and causes a big commotion with the bird escaping and flying all around, he gives her a personal tour of the place and will not let her pay for any of the fabrics she buys there for her daughter's wedding (Figure 4.12, 4.13).



Figure 4.12. Chasing the duck

He then spends the whole afternoon entertaining her in his office, while a group of out-of-town clients, including Yŏng-sik's father, wait patiently outside for their turn. Eventually, he is brought to justice when the visitors from the countryside lose their patience and go directly to the head of the department store to do their business. Ch'ang Chin is then called in by his boss and harshly criticized for all his past sins (Figure 4.14).



Figure 4.13. Sun-hŭi's mother on her shopping spree

In a word, the film portrays Ch'ang Chin as clearly beyond any hope of reform. Yet, his irredeemably evil character remains relatively free from satirical exaggeration. By contrast, if we turn to satirical representations in print periodicals at the time, we can see that comic exaggeration is almost always proportional to the vice depicted. In other words, the more evil the character is supposed to be, the greater the degree of comic exaggeration. Thus, American imperialists, their South Korean lackeys, and domestic saboteurs and spies are always more markedly caricaturized than, say, North Korean subjects appearing in satirical cartoons. Paradoxically, Yun's film overturns this rule and, apparently, to its own detriment. It is little surprise, then, that the sparse criticisms of the first North Korean comedy shortly after its release, before any mention of it completely

disappears in the early 1960s, formulaically reiterate that the film “belittles” (*waeso*)¹⁷⁰ and “insults” (*moyok*)¹⁷¹ ordinary Korean people by representing them as “eccentric” (*kwebyŏkhan*) and “unrealistic” (*pihyŏnsiljŏk*)¹⁷² individuals. Ultimately, critics accused Yun Chae-yŏng of formalist tendencies, and his film was soon cast into oblivion.¹⁷³



Figure 4.14. Ch’ang Chin reprimanded for his misdeeds

¹⁷⁰ “Yŏnghwa yesul ūi piyak kwa hyŏnksin ūl wihayŏ!” [For rapid growth and innovation of film art!], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 12 (1958): 3.

¹⁷¹ “1958 nyŏndo tokchadŭl ūi p’yŏnji chung esŏ” [Readers’ letters from 1958], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 1 (1959): 30.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷³ “Ssinario mit yŏnghwa ch’angjak saŏp ūi kaejin ūl wihayŏ: Ssinario mit yŏnghwa ch’angjak il’kun hoeŭi esŏ han kyoyuk munhwasang Ri Il-gyŏng tonji ūi pogo (yoji)” [Improving screenwriting and filmmaking], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 1 (1961): 8.

Yun writes in the article quoted earlier that he chose to situate the comic in the “storyline” (*syujet’ŭ*) rather than in the characters, purposefully avoiding “unnecessary exaggeration” (*pulp’iryohan kwajang*).¹⁷⁴ And this approach might have, indeed, been far more effective, had all the characters in the film been intrinsically good, something North Korean filmmakers discover only in the mid-1960s, as they come to a realization that the good and the bad always need to be kept separate in order to create distinct varieties of laughter they were going for – the positive laughter at one’s own Self and the negative laughter at the Other. As the example of the first failed comedy demonstrates, when those laws are reversed (and they are in Yun’s film, since the more positive character of Sun-hŭi’s mother is depicted through comic exaggeration, whereas what is clearly the film’s anti-hero, Ch’ang Chin, hardly is), the inevitable happens – we heartily laugh at the good guys and we merely give the bad guy a snicker, perhaps, not exactly what the state would have liked to see in its very first comedy made by an eminent film director.

This analysis should make it clear now why *Uri sawi, uri myŏnŭri* encountered the resentment of both ordinary viewers and critics. The issue, as we see, lay in several critical miscalculations Yun made. First, he did not strictly follow his own rule to make the storyline alone the mainstay of the comic and did allow some comic exaggeration into the film. Second, his choice of the object of this exaggeration was completely ineffective. Instead of endowing the film’s antagonist, Ch’ang Chin, with the highest degree of comic qualities, he chose to confer them upon one of the good characters, Yŏng-sik’s mother-in-law-to-be. As a result, the comic effect in the film is achieved through both the plot and the character portrayal, although strangely in an inverse manner and contrary to the principles of comic exaggeration. Had Ch’ang Chin been an essentially good character

¹⁷⁴ Yun, “Usŭm ŭi pigyŏl,” 16.

like Sun-hŭi's mother, the latter's comically exaggerated representation would have not stuck out as much. But, by letting the good one take all the brunt of the joke, even if the joke was good-hearted and harmless to begin with, while sparing the truly bad guy our sharpest satirical laughter, Yun Chae-yŏng essentially tickled his audience the wrong way.

4.6 Conclusion

Although the latter half of the 1950s was a period of political purges against Soviet Koreans, it does not mean that Pyongyang once and for all turned its back on all things Soviet. The anti-Soviet campaign was a method of getting rid of political rivals and individuals whose loyalties could have possibly been divided between two homelands that were locked in a mutually unequal political and economic relationship, while Kim Il Sung was trying to assert his power and unite the country under his leadership. It was also a fight against Soviet revisionism identified with Nikita Khrushchev's new politics of "thaw" and "peaceful co-existence" with the imperialist West. However, those elements of Soviet cultural influence that played into the regime's hands and advanced its own political goals were never abandoned. Anti-Western political satire, which entered North Korea in the late 1940s and flourished throughout the 1950s, was one of them.

While satirical pictorial representations normally separated between the objects of comic criticism, adopting appropriate styles and methods based on whether it was a satire on contemporary North Korean society, South Korea, or the United States, Yun's satirical

comedy made no such distinction, bringing the good and the bad all together and, as we have seen, to some rather disastrous results. One might say that the director attempted to do something quite impossible by combining humor and satire in one film without clearly demarcating their respective provinces, thereby confusing and upsetting his audiences.

Perhaps, that was an inevitable result of conflicting directives: on the one hand, contemporary cultural production fostered a sharp satirical sensibility, while, on the other, the new cultural policy of the late 1950s promoted a new kind of positive laughter associated with the joy of living in the new socialist North Korea. It looks like Yun's film tried to please both camps and it did not work. After all, a satirical comedy devoid of comic exaggeration is a contradiction in terms, whichever way you look at it.

But regardless of the director's true intentions behind making his comedy the way he did, the forgotten film, no doubt, shows much more than it hides. Not quite a perfect utopian vision the state had, probably, hoped to see, *Uri sawi, uri myŏnŭri* reveals the richness and complexity of North Korean society at an important historical moment, with all its inner contradictions, challenges, and dreams. Like the film director, the court jester always has to negotiate between what is said and what is left unsaid. When the truth about the king and his rule lacks the cloak of laughter, it cannot be dismissed as a fool's joke. And that is precisely the mistake Yun made: serious matters in this genre can only be presented through crudeness – the graver the flaw, the cruder its comic treatment must be, and Ch'ang Chin's flaws were serious enough to warrant a proportionally strong caricaturization, something North Korea's first satirical comedy failed to deliver.

The director's tragic mistake in negotiating the two varieties of laughter in a

single film cost him his career and, possibly, his life.¹⁷⁵ This also had a profound impact on the development of North Korean cinema in the next two decades – no filmmaker until Shin Sang-ok was allowed the degree of directorial freedom that Yun Chae-yŏng briefly had in the late 1950s, nor was another satirical comedy produced again by Pyongyang until the early 2000s. In fact, since the early 1960s, the film director is hardly ever mentioned again either in film credits or in the press, while authorship of the film becomes commonly attributed to the screenwriter. Thus, the first comedy's popular and critical fiasco foreclosed a real possibility for any further development of *auteur* cinema in North Korea and created an official aversion to cinematic satire for years to come.

¹⁷⁵ None of the North Korean sources available to me mention Yun again after the fiasco of his film. We can only surmise what happened to him after he became the subject of this major critical offensive.

5. From Marilyn Monroe to Kim Jong Il: The Making of Socialist Cinephilia

5.1 Introduction



Figure 5.1. Monroe in *Something's Got to Give* (1962)

Although no one in North Korea probably saw the scandalous scene from Marilyn Monroe's unfinished 1962 film *Something's Got to Give*, where she is shown fully nude as she comes out of a pool and lingers in front of the camera, many must have been rather thrilled to read its description on the pages of *Chosŏn yŏnghwa*, the country's only film journal (Figure 5.1).¹⁷⁶ Rendered euphemistically into Korean as a “symbol of physical beauty” (*yukch'emi ūi sangjing*), Monroe was re-imagined by the article's anonymous author as a classic *sinp'agŭk* heroine, an image well known to any Korean. A melodramatic form popular during the colonial period (1910-45), *sinp'agŭk* (“new-school drama”) usually featured as their heroine an innocent country girl who comes to Seoul in

¹⁷⁶ “Mollo nŭn nuga chugyŏnŭnga? Hŏlliudŭ ūi pigŭk” [Who killed Monroe? Hollywood tragedy], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 2 (1965): 50.

search of work and gets eventually sold into prostitution. Overly sentimental *sinp'agŭk* stories, often adapted for the stage and screen during that period, have been commonly read as a national allegory of Korea's own unfortunate fate, after the country had fallen prey to Japan's colonial designs.

It is quite ironic that the former Hollywood "sex symbol" would so easily come to be identified with the plight of the oppressed and the downtrodden. The semiotic operation was complete by connecting Marilyn's death to her alleged victimization by the studio system. The article claimed that Monroe had been forced to star in "licentious movies" (*saekchŏng yŏnghwa*), which drove her to a slow death. In her newly found North Korean "stardom," however, the late Hollywood celebrity reemerges as a symbol of martyrdom neatly aligned with the interests and ideals of the working class. Marilyn's "sex appeal," too, becomes reinterpreted by North Korean film critics as the product of manipulation by immoral studio magnates, responsible for her ruin and untimely passing.

It is not coincidental that major Hollywood stars, such as Marilyn Monroe, would be so readily appropriated by North Korea at this point in North Korean history. In fact, as this chapter will show, contemporary fascination with Monroe was not *despite*, but rather *because of* her status as a "sex symbol." After the failure of the studio's first comedy to please the audiences and in the face of the challenges posed by the "cinema of fits and starts," which gave filmgoers all the wrong kinds of pleasure, the film establishment was firmly set on creating just the right type of film experience that would neither lead spectators astray into the realm of forbidden pleasures, nor leave them deeply dissatisfied.

As the rift between Pyongyang and Moscow continued to widen in the wake of anti-Soviet purges, student defections, and Kim Il Sung's growing personality cult discussed in the previous chapter, the film industry found itself on the brink of a serious crisis. Since the studio only produced a meager handful of features a year, it relied heavily on the import of Soviet motion pictures. Now this option became suddenly no longer available, and Pyongyang was faced with a dilemma of how to fill in the void created by the new predicament. For example, between 1956 and 1958 the North Korean studio produced only 16 features, whereas an average number of screenings per year reached a quarter of a million.¹⁷⁷ Even with all the non-feature films the studio was making, there was no way it could keep up these numbers without a new strategy, once the Kremlin withdrew its assistance.

Thus, by the early 1960s, Pyongyang found itself confronted with a number of challenges. First, it needed to drastically increase its domestic production of feature films in order to keep movie theaters across the country open and running. Second, it desperately needed to develop a comedy genre that would be popular with the audiences and politically effective at the same time. And lastly, it had to find ways to counter the deleterious effects of the "cinema of fits and starts," which created new unsanctioned loci of laughter and enjoyment. Altogether, all three concerns ultimately converged on the issue of pleasure, accounting for a sudden spike in the production of new discourses on cinema.

By the end of the 1950s, vexed filmgoers started to express their discontent, complaining that the sparse domestic productions released by the national film studio were hardly entertaining. One reader grumbled in his letter to the journal that almost all

¹⁷⁷ "Chosŏn yŏnghwa chejak illam" [Index of Korean films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 9 (1958): 58, 22.

Korean films were exclusively dramas, whereas audiences were eager to see more laughter and songs on the big screen.¹⁷⁸ Another disgruntled patron lamented that most protagonists of Korean films were “too stiff” (*nŏmu ttakttakhada*), while the repeated use of the same techniques, such as fade-ins and fade-outs for transitions, broke the flow of the film-viewing experience, giving the spectator a “feeling of displeasure” (*pulk’waehan kam*).¹⁷⁹ As a result, we begin to see an increasing number of articles in North Korean film journals about how to make movies more interesting and appealing to the audience, focusing on the affective dimension of film art.

In their search for the answer, critics and filmmakers, surprising as it may sound, turned to no other than Hollywood. Especially interested in the development of American film comedy, they begin to experiment with a new musical comedy form. This chapter revisits these fascinating debates of the 1960s we find on the pages of *Chosŏn yŏnghwa*, leading up to my analysis of the first successful “light comedy” (*kyŏng hŭigŭk*) production, *Myŏngnanghan mudae* (“Merry Ring,” 1966; dir. Kim Yŏng), which finally was able to resolve the issue of wanting cinematic pleasure. Essentially, a creative adaptation of Hollywood musicals and early slapstick comedies, I argue, the North Korean innovation was conceived as a means to revive the national film industry and raise the cinema’s popularity with increasingly disaffected audiences.

¹⁷⁸ Ri Chŏng-baek, “Tchalbko, usŭmi nŏmch’nŭn yŏnghwa rŭl” [Toward Short and Funny Films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 2 (1962): 39.

¹⁷⁹ Kye Sun-bok, “Chom tŏ chaeminanŭn yŏnghwa rŭl” [More Interesting Films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1962): 39.

5.2 The Beginnings of North Korean Cinephilia

One of the strategies in responding to the challenge of the “cinema of fits and starts” was to deepen film appreciation among filmgoers. Starting with its first issues, the country’s sole film journal began to methodically introduce its readers to the technical vocabulary of film terms. By the early 1960s, the readers were already familiar with such key concepts, as dramaturgy (*tŭramatturgiya*), scenario (*ssinario*), plot (*syujet’ŭ*), detail (*tit’eil*), action (*cheist’ubie*; *haengdong*), shooting script (*k’ont’inyut’i*; *yŏnch’ul taebon*), shot (*kkadŭrŭ*; *k’attŭ*; *hwamyŏn*), editing (*monttajyu*; *p’yŏnjip*), fade-in (*hwaedŭ in*; *yongmyŏng*) and fade-out (*hwaedŭ aut’ŭ*; *yongam*), overlap (*obarap’ppu*), wipe (*waip’ŭ*), and split screen (*ijung roch’ul*), which the journal elaborated upon in a succinct encyclopedic format.¹⁸⁰

As the terms themselves make apparent, the specialized language of film grammar reflected the foreign origins of the filmmaking craft, showing a mixture of both English and Russian words along with an attempt to transpose them into Sino-Korean wherever possible. By the 1960s, when the journal gets into full-fledged discussions of such technical matters as editing, cinematography, directing, acting, and film scoring, the general reader could have been expected to follow along what could otherwise be seen as rather complex and esoteric subjects. The elaboration of technical film terms was augmented in this period by more sophisticated explanations of the filmmaking process, including the tricks of location shooting, lighting, and mise-en-scène.

¹⁸⁰ Examples taken from several issues of *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* magazine for 1958.

Reviews of foreign films and news of both domestic and overseas film festivals began to fill the pages of *Chosŏn yŏnghwa*, initiating the devoted reader into a global community of film lovers. While this global community was defined largely by the current political geography, which divided the world into the “bad” West and the rest, Hollywood’s place within it was somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, Hollywood was denounced as the ideological vanguard of world capitalism. On the other, it was celebrated as a leading center of pioneering film technologies, with a special emphasis at the time being given to the development of widescreen processes, such as CinemaScope. To further complicate this relationship, Pyongyang would selectively endorse certain individual filmmakers and stars, as the story with Monroe demonstrates, if that could serve its current agenda.

Beyond that, the journal promoted burgeoning socialist cinephilia among its readers through its effort to develop such critical skills as film interpretation and analysis. Essays featuring analyses of select scenes from recent films drew the reader’s attention to the process of affective formation, explaining how through certain formal techniques, such as editing, filmmakers were able to elicit a gamut of emotional responses from the audience. Much attention was given to the role played by the camera. Calling it “the eye of the film,” one critic elaborated on the importance of camera angles and framing, introducing the reader to the notion of a cinematic point of view.

Drawing on examples of recent Soviet films, familiar to the North Korean audience, with their well-developed film language and cinematic techniques, film critics called upon viewers to remain ever alert to the choice of specific details and their use for dramatic effect. One article, for instance, elaborated at length on the instances of repeated

close-ups of Othello's hands in the famous 1955 Soviet adaptation of Shakespeare's classic, first, at the beginning of the film and, later, toward the end, explaining how the same detail was used for completely different expressive purposes.¹⁸¹

In addition to color and sound, critics also urged film-viewers to cultivate an awareness of other, even seemingly minor, elements of the film, such as background and landscape. In their totality, all the elements had to serve either some narrative or dramatic function, readers were told.¹⁸² Asking their readers to pay closer attention to such matters, critics hoped to take them beyond an immediate and unreflective experience of film-viewing to a plane where one's affective engagement with the film and one's appreciation of it would be enhanced by a stronger intellectual understanding of cinematic techniques and conventions.

The sprouting of North Korean cinephilia, interestingly enough, was concurrent with the emergence of French cinephilia, associated with the activities of the famous Cinémathèque Française in Paris, as well as small local ciné-clubs. While French cinephiles flourished around numerous formal and informal film groups and small cafés, their North Korean counterparts also had their own "film clubs" (*yŏnghwa kurakpu*) and "film circles" (*yŏnghwa kurujokkŭ*). By the early 1960s, most state companies organized their own film groups, while students, housewives, and senior citizens could join a film circle at school or as part of their community club. Film exhibitors and distributors would also encourage some form of similar cinephile activities, often immediately following the screening or during an intermission. *Chosŏn yŏnghwa*, as well as other popular

¹⁸¹ Han Hyŏng-wŏn, "Yŏnghwa rŭl ōttŏk'e kamsanghal kŏsinga (3)" [How to watch films (3)], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 11 (1958): 46-47.

¹⁸² Han Hyŏng-wŏn, "Yŏnghwa rŭl ōttŏk'e kamsanghal kŏsinga (4)," [How to watch films (4)], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 12 (1958): 26-27.

magazines not necessarily devoted specifically to cinema often solicited film reviews from their readers.

In both cases the experience involved an important intellectual component, with highbrow film criticism promoted by *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* in Korea and by *Cahiers du Cinéma* in France. Just as *Cahiers*, North Korea's *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* introduced its readers to past and present cinematic legacies, both socialist and Western. A long-running series on world cinema highlighted the importance of certain filmmakers and films for global film history. Apart from writing about the accomplishments of famous Soviet filmmakers, such as Kuleshov, Pudovkin, and Eisenstein, the journal also featured essays on major European and American directors, including Méliès, Griffith, and Chaplin.

As we can see, budding North Korean cinephilia was both concurrent with and, in many ways, similar to French cinephilia, but there was also one important distinction: while the latter was largely a grassroots reaction to the influx of American movies previously banned under the Nazi occupation, the former was largely a product of top-down efforts to organize rambunctious North Korean audiences into more disciplined and erudite consumers of the moving image. However, making sure that every filmgoer knows how to interpret the film correctly on his own, especially at times when official interpretation by state-employed “film explainers” (*yonghwa haesŏlja*) failed or was not available, was not the sole concern.

The film education promoted by *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* clearly went beyond simply getting the correct political message from the movie and was just as much, if not more, concerned with the issue of pleasure. It trained the spectator to notice even a minor detail and reflect on the techniques of montage, shot composition, and cinematography, as well

as acting, music, and color, culminating in the experience of intellectual pleasure. The new cinephilia, thus, encouraged a more intellectually fulfilling relationship with cinema in contrast with the “cinema of fits and starts,” which thrived on the preeminence of the bodily and the reflexive.

5.3 Pleasures of the Body

Cinephilia by itself, however, was not enough to wrest the wayward jester-spectator from the grasp of his love for visceral pleasure. The umbilical cord between him and the hearty laughter engendered by the never-ending snafus that shattered the film process and the cinematic illusion asunder was too strong to be nullified by mindwork alone. What was needed was a “healthy” alternative that would move the dislocated site of physical pleasure away from the focus on the infelicitously exposed technical and technological viscera of the film process back into the narrative space of the film. And it was precisely this new identification within the visual text itself that critics and filmmakers at the time were all in hot pursuit of.

A new interest in the star’s physical appearance we can glean from the article on Marilyn Monroe quoted above was hardly accidental. In fact, a month before this piece was published *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* ran another essay emphasizing the importance of “physical beauty” (*yukch’emi*) for North Korean film actors. Written by the sports instructor from the Pyongyang Theater and Film Institute, it criticized a prevailing misconception among North Korean actors that too much physical exercise could damage their vocal chords, among other things, insisting that “physical beauty” was a key to

success in acting and film acting, in particular. The article's discussion of three categories of beauty – *yukch'emi* ("bodily beauty"), *kǒngangmi* ("health beauty"), and *sǒnmi* ("line beauty") – led the author to stress the vital importance of an all-around physical regimen for a film actor, including such full-body sport activities as judo, boxing, fencing, skiing, skating, horse-riding, and cycling. It is argued that neither makeup, nor costume can make up for a truly beautiful and healthy physique.¹⁸³

Seen as an extension of a beautiful interior world, the actor's muscle tone and overall physical appearance were also linked to a better control over one's acting skills. The article pointed out that the numerous instances of "unnatural and awkward acting" (*pujayǒnsūrǒpko ōsaekhan yǒngi*) among North Korean film actors, as well as failure to be in full control of one's stage emotions, such as "excitement" (*hǔngbun*) or "passion" (*chǒngyǒl*), connected to the performance of certain roles, all stemmed from a lack of mastery over internal organs involved in the production of those affective states.¹⁸⁴ Clearly, physical beauty, according to this view, goes far beyond what would be called "sex appeal" in the West and explains the deliberate choice of words in describing Marilyn as a "symbol of physical beauty" in the piece featured in the following issue of the film journal.¹⁸⁵

At the same time, this concept of physical attractiveness was contrasted with the Western understanding of bodily beauty as inherently sexual. Thus, North Korean film critics lashed out against a contemporary South Korean production *Aesue chǒjǔn t'oyoil*

¹⁸³ Ryu Kwang-du, "Yukch'emi wa ch'eyuk" [Physical beauty and physical education], *Chosǒn yǒnghwa* 1 (1965): 40-41.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 41.

¹⁸⁵ "Mollo nǔn nuga chugyǒnǔnga?," 50.

(“A Sad Saturday,” dir. Ch’oe Hun), calling it a “sex film” (*tosaek yŏnghwa*), because it included a scene showing an artist painting a nude model.¹⁸⁶ The perverse Western focus on sexuality, or the “principle of lust” (*saekchŏngjuŭi*), was attributed to Freud’s corrupting influence that promoted the awareness of one’s libido and connected it to the workings of the man’s unconscious, which, in turn, led to Western culture’s embrace of “the principle of fleshly pleasure” (*kwannŭngjŏk hyangnakjuŭi*).¹⁸⁷ This cult of sex was propagated in bourgeois art and literature under the name of “love” (*sarang*), although its true purpose was merely to stimulate man’s peripheral nerves and excite his animalistic instincts. Featuring characters with some sort of psychosexual pathology, sexual perversion, or mental illness, bourgeois “love stories” commonly trafficked in incestuous or sadomasochistic “romance” in order to appeal to the lowly interests of its degenerate audiences.¹⁸⁸

While North Korean criticism outright rejected any form of sexual depravity, it came to recognize the true charm of physical beauty and its usefulness in the making of a more appealing and attractive national cinema. The linguistic shift from a “sex symbol” to a “symbol of physical beauty” we see in Marilyn’s story was, therefore, more than simply a terminological ruse and should be understood as part of a larger discourse of the 1960s on the place of physicality and the question of pleasure in contemporary North Korean cinema. It is noteworthy that, unlike in the American star system, the actor’s physical winsomeness was not meant to separate the screen star from the audience and

¹⁸⁶ Kim Sŏng, “Yangk’i yŏnghwa nŭn ch’imnyak ŭi mayak” [Yankee films are aggressors’ drugs], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1961): 27-28.

¹⁸⁷ Kyŏng Ryŏng-il, “Purŭjyŏa pandong munye choryu rŭl pandaehayo: Saekchŏngjuŭi munhak kwa P’uroidŭjuŭi” [Against reactionary bourgeois art influence: pornographic literature and Freudianism], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 2 (1965): 48.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

elevate him or her above the ordinary individual. Instead, the film actor was seen as, in a certain way, representative of the collective beauty of the North Korean people, as a whole. In fact, it was insisted that just about anyone could rise to become a star. In order to promote this view the national film studio announced the opening of a special yearlong program in film acting in 1965 for anyone interested to becoming an actor. Starting in September, classes were offered four times a week, and after twelve months of successful theoretical and practical training with real film actors, the program's graduates were assured they would be able to give a professional solo performance on camera.¹⁸⁹

Another form of spectatorial pleasure centered on the body also took its cue from Hollywood. Its source was the physical comedy of early American slapstick. In particular, North Korean criticism singled out the “progressive” work of two important men in the history of this genre – Charlie Chaplin and Mack Sennett. Already shortly after the end of the Korean War (1950-53) amid overwhelmingly negative assessments of American cinema, the figure of Chaplin loomed large in North Korean culture. In August of 1954, a North Korean international news magazine *Kukche saenghwal* (“International Life”) featured an article on Chaplin.¹⁹⁰ Presented as a comedian whose progressive art transcends both political and cultural barriers, Chaplin was embraced by Pyongyang as a supporter of the working class and celebrated for his “humanistic individualism.”¹⁹¹

While Chaplin was praised for his progressive politics, Sennett, although politically not as mature, was recognized as the father of American comedy and was

¹⁸⁹ “Tansin: Sae Ssaktŭl” [News brief: new sprouts], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 11-12 (65): 21.

¹⁹⁰ Ryubobi Orulloba, “Ch’yalli Ch’yap’ŭllin ŭl mannago” [Meeting Charlie Chaplin], *Kukche saenghwal* 15 (1954): 38-42.

¹⁹¹ Kim Chong-ho, “Cheil ch’a segye taejŏn sigi ŭi chabonjuŭi yŏnghwa” [Capitalist cinema during the World War I period], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 8 (1965): 50-52.

commended for the democratic quality of his films that, North Korean critics wrote, were “truly for the people.”¹⁹² He is also awarded the title of “progressive” for his comic exposés of the inequities of American society. Sennett’s grotesque portrayals of the police helped perfect the art of gag. Gags, North Korean critics argued, were at the heart of American comedy: completely independent of the film’s theme and plot, they usually stand on their own as self-contained comic acts inducing viewers to laugh through reflex than anything else.¹⁹³

While gags were criticized for their lack of ideological anchoring in the film’s larger themes, which contradicted the fundamental principle of Marxist aesthetic theory, they were at the same time celebrated as a distinctive feature of American slapstick comedies, originating in the tradition of the circus. In Sennett’s comedies, however, critics pointed out, they are commonly used in politically progressive ways as a means of satire directed at the class enemies of the proletariat, such as the police and capitalist criminals. According to the prevailing notion at the time, this kind of social satire was regarded as politically progressive and like the works of Cervantes, Swift, and Twain was held in high esteem by North Korean ideologues.

5.4 A New Theory of Laughter

While the new emphasis on physical attractiveness and the centrality of comic gags acknowledged the bodily needs of the viewing subject, since both laughter and other

¹⁹² Kim Chong-ho, “Segye yŏnghwasa kaegwan (5): Hŭigŭk yŏnghwa ŭi palsaeng” [Survey of the history of world cinema (5): the birth of comedy films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 5 (1965): 45-46.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 46.

forms of pleasure are, in many ways, often a very physical experience associated with our bodily responses and functions, the disaffection with satire on film following the fiasco of the first North Korean comedy discussed in chapter 3 necessitated further theoretical quests for a more practical form of comedy that would meet the political demands of the time. Contemporary debates on the comic in cinema largely centered on the triad of theoretical questions: the disambiguation of what the object of laughter actually is, the problem of whether positive heroes can function as comical characters, and, finally, the extent to which the technique of exaggeration can be safely employed.

In Marxist-Leninist aesthetic theory, laughter was understood as a form of criticism. Although laughter can take different forms and carry a variety of connotations, at its core there always should be an “intense critical passion against the negative,” that is, patriarchal and bourgeois ideas and practices.¹⁹⁴ As one North Korean critic noted, “Although the comic usually accompanies laughter, we cannot call any laughter comical. If it is to be comical laughter, it has to be without exception laughter accompanied by *emotional criticism* (*chǒngsǒjǒk pip’an*).”¹⁹⁵ Conversely, laughter devoid of a critical dimension was regarded as flippant and retrograde. Therefore, it was essential to be crystal clear on *who* or *what* was being laughed at, leaving no room for any ambiguities.¹⁹⁶

Another critic admonished that in a recent film version of a comedy play, *Sanullim* (“Rumblings of a Mountain”), which North Korean film historians still count as

¹⁹⁴ Kim Yǒng-sǒn, “Saenghwal kwa usǔm: kyǒng hūigŭk yǒnghwa ‘Sanullim’ e taehayǒ” [Life and laughter: about light comedy film “Rumblings of a Mountain”], *Chosǒn yǒnghwa* 4 (1963): 40.

¹⁹⁵ Yun Ki-ch’an, “Usǔm ūi palhyǒn kwa p’yohyǒn supǒp” [Methods of revealing and expressing laughter], *Chosǒn yǒnghwa* 9 (1966): 29.

¹⁹⁶ Ryu Ho-son, “Hūigŭk yǒnghwa e taehan sogyǒn” [Thoughts on comedy films], *Chosǒn yǒnhwa* 7 (1962): 17.

the first national comedy film, the director failed to give the audience a clear focus for laughter. The laughter there, he explains, is ambiguous and at times even seems gratuitous. The critic blamed that on the exaggerated external performance that detracted from the “concealed laughter” directed at the true objects of derision in the film – a pair of characters embodying old views and attitudes.¹⁹⁷

Instead of external comedy, filmmakers were urged to focus more on “psychological comedy” (*simni hŭigŭk*) and pay greater attention to acting. The famous Stanislavsky system, which had been successfully adopted by Hollywood, was now becoming also popular in North Korea. Numerous references to it were made in critical essays, articles were published explaining its main principles, and translations of the original writings were made available to Korean readers. According to Stanislavsky, characters in this type of comedy had to be average, ordinary people, rather than some kind of eccentric personalities, while comic action had to unfold psychologically, rather than externally.¹⁹⁸

As the new discourse was moving away from satirical comedy in the direction of “light comedy” (*kyŏng hŭigŭk*), characterized by a subtle play of psychology over comic outward action and lyricism over outright criticism, the use of certain comic techniques and, in particular, the technique of comic exaggeration was getting increasingly under fire due to its tendency to distort facts for the sake of a comic effect. One critic mentioned that the deliberately awkward expressions and movements of Sŏk-ch’ŏl, the positive hero

¹⁹⁷ Kim, “Saenghwal kwa usŭm,” 40.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 42.

in *Sanullim*, instead of making the spectator laugh, only made him feel displeasure.¹⁹⁹ While the physical comedy of early American slapstick was becoming more accepted in North Korea, filmmakers were still struggling to figure out how to adapt it to films with, essentially, only positive characters.

One of the ways to overcome this problem, some critics suggested, was to focus, instead, on the “depiction of detail” (*sebu myosa*), making use of close-ups as much as possible in order to achieve the necessary emphasis without overusing the technique of comic exaggeration, which is central to slapstick and gags.²⁰⁰ The close-up, it was argued, emphasizes the object of comic representation *as it is*, that is, without any qualitative or quantitative distortion. Another recommended technique was contrast, which can be best exploited through the use of parallel editing. Critics insisted that comic contrast was much more effective in film than in any other media, as the juxtaposition of events occurring simultaneously in different places set to a film’s rhythm and tempo would necessarily arouse a gratifying laughter in the viewer. The methods of contrast and close-up are, thus, most compatible with psychological, or lyrical, comedy, which tends to emphasize the action’s inner dimension over its form and often depends on the actor’s ability to express these psychological states with subtle facial expressions.²⁰¹

The question of pleasure remained very much at the heart of all these debates. As one film critic writing in *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* noted, “If we rely too much on external comedy, it will lead to overexaggeration of life and even its distortion; but if we lean

¹⁹⁹ Kim Hun, “Yŏn’gi esŏ ūi yesuljŏk kwajang” [Artistic exaggeration in acting], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 8 (1963): 22.

²⁰⁰ Ryu, “Hŭigŭk yŏnghwa e taehan sogyŏn,” 19-20.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

more toward psychological comedy, we will approach the serious too closely and will not be able to arouse pleasure.”²⁰² In order to ensure that neither of that happens and that all the disparate elements and comic techniques are harmoniously integrated to produce a feeling of pleasure and arouse positive laughter in the spectator, they would all have to play to the same tune.

5.5 Playing the Heartstrings

The creation of a new comedy genre would have been inconceivable without a parallel experimentation in the area of film music. Most Korean films at the time, including early attempts at comedies, were, as a rule, accompanied by “serious” orchestral music, which no doubt detracted from the “light” and “funny” aspect of these films. Thus, the use of “light music” (*kyŏng ŭmak*) in the early 1960s film *Kalmaegiho ch’ŏngnyŏndŭl* (“Youth of the Seagull Boat”) was in stark contrast with the prevailing tendency at the time to use heavier orchestral music, which also quite often happened to be prerecorded rather than written for a specific film. The success of the film, both critical and popular, led some to even suggest that it be turned into a bona fide musical. The new type of music in this groundbreaking film, with its abundance of comical elements expressed through musical means, had introduced the much-needed diversity

²⁰² Ibid., 20.

into the film musical practice of the day, expanding the boundaries of ongoing contemporary debates on the direction of film music in North Korean cinema.²⁰³

However, the film was not without problems. One critic commented that, disappointingly, the music in the film failed to go beyond a scene interpretive function. “Music here,” the critic writes, “only tries to find various musical cues (*ŭmakchŏk tong’gidŭlman*) in every scene, and shows no unifying musical idea (*kwant’ongtoen ŭmak sasang*).” If the composer had found a musical theme for the scene in which Yong-jin and Pong-sun, the two protagonists of the film, run into each other on the street for the first time and then used it every time they meet thereafter through musical repetition and development, he continues, how much more it would have helped the audience’s “affective perception” (*kamsu*).²⁰⁴

Kalmaegiho combined light music to express comical moments with symphonic orchestral music for more dramatic scenes. While the combination of two different types of music was not an issue in itself, the critic bemoaned its lack of harmonization, proclaiming that, “music composers have not yet figured out how to write music for a film like *Kalmaegiho* which employs various numerous techniques in its production.” He concludes on a brighter note, however, pointing out that this pioneering film succeeded in breaking the old clichés and molds of “boringly” (*ttabunhage*) making use of only orchestral music.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Ri Hi-rim, “Yŏnghwa ŭmak ŭi sŏng’kyŏk kwa kinŭng: Yŏnghwa ‘*Kalmaegiho ch’ŏngnyŏndŭl*’ ŭi ŭmak e tawhayŏ” [Character and functions of film music: about music in the film “Youth of the Seagull Boat”], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 5 (1961): 20.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 20.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 22.

The move away from “serious” orchestral scores was accompanied by an embrace of traditional Korean music, a result of a campaign launched in the wake of the Third Party Congress held in April of 1956, which began to actively promote the idea of Korean sovereignty (*chuch’e*). Up till that point, the music used in Korean films was predominantly Western, with traditional melodies reserved for historical dramas and movies about the Korean countryside, which were relatively few in number. However, even the use of Western music for Korean film scores left much to be desired. For one thing, filmmakers tended to employ music descriptively with a view to arousing certain emotions with their audiences. This, inevitably, led to the formation of clichés, such as over-reliance on march songs for scenes meant to move and inspire or abuse of solo pieces for scenes showing suffering, agony, and torment. Sometimes, the added sound track simply would not work for a particular scene, yet nothing would be done about it.²⁰⁶

The decision to “improve” Korean traditional instruments was announced at the Fourth Congress of the Korean Workers’ Party in September 1961.²⁰⁷ However, despite the official blessing, the adoption of traditional music into film initially met with the resistance of many filmmakers, who opposed it on the grounds that it was not suitable for this purpose due to its rather unique character and specific uses. Examples from some recent productions, such as *Hwanghae ŭi norae* (“The Song of the Yellow Sea”), however, showed that traditional music could be successfully adapted to stories on modern subjects. The task was not an easy one and required that some major changes be

²⁰⁶ Hong Sŭng-hak, “Minjok ūmak toip esŏ yŏnghwa yesul i kŏdun kyŏlsil” [Results of introducing national music into film art], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 7 (1961): 5.

²⁰⁷ Keith Howard, “Redefining Koreanness: North Korea, Musicology, Ideology, and ‘Improved’ Korean Instruments,” in *Exploring North Korean Arts*, ed. Rüdiger Frank (Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2011), 181.

made to the arrangement of traditional music, as well as to the performance style and the very physical appearance of certain instruments in order for this type of music to be effectively integrated into contemporary film scores.

The process of modification of traditional instruments allowed to expand their tonal range, which made it possible to use them more easily together with Western instruments to add some national flavor to the drama. A number of traditional instruments, such a *haegŭm* (two-stringed fiddle) and a *taehaegŭm*, had been remodeled on the basis of modern Western instrumental principles. At times, the changes in design were quite radical, as with the *taeajaeng* (bowed zither), a seven-string instrument used in court music, whose strings were reconfigured onto a cello, which provided a desired timbre and increase in volume at the same time.²⁰⁸

The film studio was the center of these experiments, with performers themselves modifying their own instruments to expand their tonal range normally limited by the latter's constructional peculiarities. Successes were reported in extending the tones of traditional instruments in the woodwind group by five degrees in the upper range, and three in the lower, resulting in an equal temperament, a system of tuning which allowed to adapt traditional Korean woodwinds to the performance of Western music, as well as more easily incorporate them in mixed instrumental ensembles.²⁰⁹ Since traditional music differed quite drastically from modern Western music in beat, scale, tonality, performance style, melodic features, and so on, resulting in the creation of a completely different "mood" (*kamjŏng*), more work still had to be done on its systematization and

²⁰⁸ Hong, "Minjok ŭmak toip," 5-8.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 6-7.

theorization to enable further constructional changes on a larger scale, which the film industry had been calling for.²¹⁰

While Keith Howard connects these momentous changes on the North Korean music scene to the cultural nationalism associated with the indigenous shock worker movement known as Chollima,²¹¹ it seems to me that we can get a fuller picture, if we consider the practical imperatives governing the “improvement” (*kaeryang*) of Korean traditional instruments in the light of the discussions among the country’s filmmakers and cultural mandarins presented above. This is not to say that cultural nationalism was not a consideration at the time. It was very much so. However, cultural nationalism alone does not explain why North Koreans would modify their traditional instruments and why they would do so in the way they did and not any other.

Howard suggests that the reason why traditional instruments were mingled with Western ones in Korean orchestras had to do with the need for producing “ideologically appropriate music,”²¹² but this explanation overlooks contemporary music discourses, relying, for the most part, on postdated accounts from later periods. In fact, there was more to this Westernization of traditional musical instruments than simply giving a nationalist spin to the “revolutionary songs and marches”²¹³ of the period. The answer, to my mind, lies more in the contemporary demands of North Korean filmmaking, which needed distinctly Korean music scores for new films on modern subjects, but which

²¹⁰ Ibid., 7-8.

²¹¹ Howard, “Redefining Koreanness,” 183.

²¹² Ibid., 183.

²¹³ Ibid., 183.

original traditional instruments could not provide without serious constructional modification, than anything else.

Apart from achieving a viable fusion between the two rather different music systems, more attention was now being paid to a more effective use of music in cinema. Director Kim Tŭk-kwŏn, who had been educated at the same prestigious Soviet film school in the early 1950s where Yun Chae-yŏng studied, lashed out against the unmotivated reliance on symphonic music in most Korean films, both fictional and documentary, made at the time, pointing out that certain scenes would be best dramatized with solo piano or violin pieces, duets, chamber, or light music rather than a full-on orchestra. Since film music, unlike concert music, often occupies a shared space with dialogue, voiceover narration, and other sound effects, Kim pointed out, it makes it extremely difficult to use symphonic music in film without undermining its force. There are times, he reminds his reader, when the best dramatic effect is achieved without any use of sound whatsoever. Therefore, filmmakers should be very cautious with their use of music in film and always abide by the artist's golden rule of expressing much with minimalist means.²¹⁴

Another musical success of *Kalmaegiho* was attributed to the film's use of rhythm and tempo, which, it was judged, represented quite faithfully the real life rhythm and tempo of the Chollima generation. Unlike a number of other contemporary productions, this film was said to capture the modern rhythms in all their dynamism and complexity instead of making too common a mistake of either going with an invariably fast pace or

²¹⁴ Kim Tŭk-kwŏn, "Yŏnghwa ūmak kwa yŏnch'ulga: Kirok yŏnghwa ūmak e taehan myŏt kaji ūigyŏn" [Film music and the director: some thoughts on music in documentary films], *Chosŏn yŏnhwa* 9 (1961): 45-46

forming the film's tempo solely based on the pattern of montage. A contemporary film director wrote that the overall rhythmic fabric of a film should be woven from a skillful integration of individual rhythms and tempos immanent in every shot, artfully bringing together the life's inner rhythms captured by the camera and the tempo emerging from the process of film editing, or montage.²¹⁵

The idea of the life's natural rhythms was couched in the metaphor of the "breath and pulse" (*hohŭp kwa maekpak*) inherent in all human activities, literally powering man's every movement. Since film is, first and foremost, a visual art form, any scene will "begin to feel tedious" (*chirihage nŭkkige toenŭn kŏsida*) after a while. Therefore, it is important to enhance the natural, immanent rhythms of the profilmic material, a fellow director explained, through a well-thought-out montage of the scene (*hwamyŏn punbae*). "A clear division [of a scene] into [constituent] shots creates a clear rhythm and tempo," Ch'ŏn Sang-in writes, referring to a particularly successful scene from the film under discussion featuring a whale hunt. In addition to breaking down the scene through editing, Ch'ŏn stresses the importance of what he calls an internal montage of every shot by means of moving the position of the camera within one shot, thereby dynamically changing its composition, point of view, and framing without having to make a cut.²¹⁶

Making an important distinction between film rhythm, on the one hand, and simply a high rate of editing, on the other, which leads to shorter individual shots and an overall faster pace of continuity, another critic reminded that, in a proper sense, film rhythm is neither equivalent to the musical patterns it employs, nor is it simply created

²¹⁵ Ch'ŏn Sang-in, "T'emp'o rijŭm e taehan sogyŏn" [Thoughts on tempo and rhythm], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 11 (1961): 34-35.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 35.

through the actors' performance within the frame, but is rather a complex combination of all these elements into one. Focusing on the whale hunt scene mentioned above, the critic shows how the director expertly utilizes the various techniques at his disposal to create a sense of dramatic tension. In order for the rhythmic organization of the film to achieve its purpose, it needs to express the character of both inner and outer movements represented in the film. Inner and outer rhythms as an abstract concept independent of these movements do not exist, Kim argues. In a sophisticated treatment of the concept of "cinematic time" (the filmic time inside an individual shot as perceived by the viewer as distinctly different from real time and projection time), Kim elucidates how this notion explains the principle of film rhythm. "Film rhythm is not mutual temporal relations of continuity between various individual shots," he points out, "but rather it is the agreement (*ilch'i*) of every shot's continuity and the audience's perception. In other words, it is not some abstract rhythm inside time, but it is the rhythm of perception (*chigak ŭi rijŭm*)."²¹⁷

Music in a film guarantees a "total accord" (*wanjŏnhan ilch'i*) of all audiovisual movements: connecting contrapuntally with the shots, it can further organize rhythm and give it even more emphasis. The same effect, Kim continues, can be also achieved through regularly repeated special sound effects, such as the sound of the motorboat engine in *Kalmaegiho*. However, the film's aural elements, the critic warns, sometimes can also become a hindrance, such as in the case of diegetically gratuitous dialogue.²¹⁸

The problem of ambiguity was also raised in regard to film music. *Kalmaegiho* was again commended for its skillful use of music, which matched the film's overall

²¹⁷ Kim Chong-ho, "Yŏnghwa rijŭm ŭi kusŏng e taehayŏ" [On creating rhythm in film], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 1 (1962): 46-48.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

movement and even helped smooth out a few abrupt scene changes. However, that was rather an exception than a rule – most contemporary films, as another writer pointed out, could do just fine without added music in most scenes, calling for elimination of “vague music” (*aemaehan ŭmaktŭl*) that pervaded contemporary productions.²¹⁹ The critic situated the root cause of this problem in the existing “old-school cram approach” (*nalgŭn pyŏrakch’gi pang’pŏp*) that prevailed in film scoring at the time. Music for film, he rued, without exception is composed hastily, there are no proper rehearsals prior to studio recording, and as long as no major mistakes are made during the single performance, the music is accepted without any question.²²⁰ Kim Tŭk-kwŏn joined him in insisting that music composers should be brought in at the earliest stages of film production to work closely with the director and the scriptwriter on the production of a film score.²²¹

Suggestions were made, such as the one by a composer Kim Ch’an-bŏm, to altogether abandon an armchair approach to film scoring by going out into the real world where films were being shot – to factories, farms, the sea, and other locations – in order to collect authentic musical material for writing good theme songs that would be widely sung by the people afterwards.²²² Another contemporary composer, Ri Chŏng-ŏn, shared his recent experience of writing music for the film *Chinsilhan saramdŭl* (“Candid

²¹⁹ Cho Kil-sŏk, “Yŏnghwa ŭmak ŭi saenghwaljŏk chinsil ŭl wihayŏ” [For real-life truthfulness of film music], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 10 (1962): 29.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

²²¹ Kim, “Yŏnghwa ŭmak kwa yŏnch’ulga,” 45-46.

²²² Kim Ch’an-bŏm, “Yaktonghanŭn hyŏnsil kwa yŏnghwa ŭmak” [The pulse of reality and film music], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 11 (1962): 17-18.

People”) through his extensive research of local folk songs (*minyo*) and life in the countryside.²²³

The North Korean film world was, indeed, taking film music seriously, going to such great lengths to create songs that would strike a chord with their jaded audiences. Even Hollywood, which had gathered some of the nation’s finest performers, as a famous American composer, Aaron Copland, himself a winner of an Academy Award for his 1948 score to *The Heiress*, has noted, would commonly have all musical scores written only *after* the film itself was completed.²²⁴ The North Koreans, conversely, sought to create a new form of film music based on original research of existing music cultures, which would combine native sounds of traditional instruments and melodies with the dramatic intensity and dynamism of Western orchestral music, touching the very “heartstrings” (*simgŭm*)²²⁵ of their viewers and moving them to laughter and tears of joy.

5.6 *Merry Ring*

Perhaps, the greatest success of this era, in which all these elements that occupied the minds of North Korean filmmakers and critics for years finally came together, was the first color comedy film, *Myŏngnanghan mudae* (“Merry Ring”). Made in 1966 under the direction of Kim Yŏng, who had also worked previously on the first light comedy film, *Sanullim*, released some five years earlier, *Merry Ring* seemed to finally fulfill both

²²³ Ri Chŏng-ŏn, “Yŏnghwa chujega wa na ŭi ch’angjak kyŏnghŏm” [Film theme songs and my filmmaking experience], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 12 (1962): 7-9.

²²⁴ Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York: New American Library, 2011), 203.

²²⁵ Ri, “Yŏnghwa chujega,” 7.

critical and popular longing for comic pleasure and positive laughter. As the name itself suggests, the film is about the North Korean circus. Despite being touted as the latest achievement in the genre of light comedy, the film defies an easy categorization as representative of the emerging genre. In fact, the ambiguity of its generic status is, probably, best exemplified by the remark made by the film director himself in one of the interviews, in which he said, “I *think* the film *Merry Ring* I made this time is a light comedy.”²²⁶ He promptly states thereafter, in line with the prevailing view at the time, that Korean people have an aversion to the “frivolous, tongue-in-cheek laughter” (*hyungkkapulgo pangjŏngmajŭn usŭm*) associated invariably in the North Korean discourse with vulgarity and crudeness. Even at play, he continues, Koreans are never frivolous – they are, instead, pleasant and romantic, while being courteous and reserved at the same time.

The director’s disclaimer is noteworthy, given that *Merry Ring* is, in fact, largely a film that elicits the viewer’s frivolous laughter. But, perhaps, because this laughter is for the most part confined to self-contained circus acts, whether it is an acrobatic stunt or a comic performance by a clown, it was not labeled as outright gratuitous and altogether out of place. In other words, the laughter in *Merry Ring*, if we turn to contemporary reviews, is always functional and diegetically motivated, even if not always ideologically anchored.

It is quite remarkable that out of twenty circus acts shown in the film, only one has clear anti-American overtones. Depicting a humorous confrontation between presumably a South Korean shoeshiner and an American soldier and a policeman, this pantomime mixes farce with buffoonery in the best tradition of circus and vaudeville

²²⁶ “Chosŏn saramŭl kŭrija” [Portraying Korean people], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 9 (1966): 4 (emphasis is mine).

(Figure 5.2). The film received only a very light critique from one of the reviewers, pointing out that it did not sufficiently use a full repertoire of comic methods, relying primarily on the comedy of errors, but this did not diminish the overall positive reception of the film.²²⁷



Figure 5.2. An anti-American pantomime in *Merry Ring*

The comic stunts displayed in the film with much knack and flair could also now be taken outside the circus ring proper by virtue of the fact that the film's main protagonist, Chin-gyu, an acrobat by training, but also an understudy for a clown, who

²²⁷ Ri Sŏng-dŏk, "Uri saenghwal kwa hŭigŭk yŏnghwa: Ch'ŏnyŏnsaek yesul yŏnghwa 'Myŏngnyanghan mudae' rŭl pogo" [Our life and comedy films: watching a color feature film "Merry Ring"], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 12 (1966): 24.

unexpectedly has to take on his place, finds himself in comical situations even outside his job, when he, for example, has to use his acrobatic skills to scale an apartment building (Figure 5.3). He does that in order to rescue a ball hurled by mistake by children playing on the street into someone's balcony. This dramatic scene is also marked as comic, when the policeman who apprehends the unwitting transgressor of public order, discovers Chin-gyu's real occupation, rounding the episode off with a hearty laugh instead of a fine or, worse, an incarceration.



Figure 5.3. Chin-gyu scales an apartment building

Other notable comic scenes include a dog soccer match reported “live” by the clown, as if it were a real game involving human players, a fight between Chin-gyu and a monkey that tries to eat a scrap of paper with an address written down on it that our

protagonist is so desperate to salvage, and numerous other clownish scenes that would make it difficult to redeem any meaning other than laughter for laughter's sake (Figure 5.4). In other words, the very same gags for which American comedy was both admired and critiqued find their way into no other than the first successful North Korean comedy.



Figure 5.4. A fight scene between Chin-gyu and the circus monkey

It is no coincidence that American-style gags would be attempted in a film set in a circus. After all, only a few years earlier a writer got in serious trouble for penning a play that made fun of bureaucratic red tape.²²⁸ Filmmakers would, thus, be hard pressed to do their own balancing acts between the two easy pitfalls of either introducing too much ideology or not enough of it into their works. Kim Yŏng seems to have found the perfect

²²⁸ More on the incident see: Balázs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953-1964* (Washington, D.C.; Stanford, California: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Stanford University Press, 2005), 181.

solution to this precarious game by setting his film safely in the circumscribed space of the circus.

While the film, sure enough, has a redeeming political quality to it, being a story of overcoming prejudices about the circus as a vulgar and unrefined art form, it is also as much a spectacle of beautiful athletic bodies doing extraordinary acrobatic feats and commanding the audience's full attention. Mixing comic acts with acrobatic stunts, *Merry Ring* is, perhaps, an example of the "cinema of attractions" in its purest form, offering a tantalizing spectacle of physical beauty, magic tricks, and buffoonery all at the same time. If we add music, color, and cinematography, the film strikes one as a deliberate example of cinematic pleasure.

Interestingly, the spectacle of acrobatic prowess and agility is very much centered on the display the acrobats' beautiful bodies. The physical beauty is further accentuated in the film by the use of costume and makeup, as well as through soft lighting and framing with close-up and medium shots. Furthermore, this beauty is flaunted by showing acrobats doing their gymnastic feats from various angles and with minimal clothing, adding to a latent sexual charge to the scenes (Figure 5.5, 5.6). By contrast, the scandalous aspect of the majority of South Korean films at the time, such as *Madame Freedom* (1956) or *The Housemaid* (1960), was more in their stories about adulterous relationships than in any actual spectacle of sexualized bodies, which in most cases was limited to rather innocuous, yet suggestive, dancehall scenes, while nudity still remained rather rare.



Figure 5.5. Chin-gyu loses his pants under the dome

What helps normalize this seemingly transgressive display of beautiful bodies in *Merry Ring* is largely the convention, which we as spectators unquestionably accept. In other words, the convention of an art form diverts the viewer's attention from what is in plain view, that is, barely covered beautiful athletic bodies, taking the edge off what otherwise could pass as risqué. It is not coincidental that Sŏng-p'il, a violinist who looks down on circus as an inferior art, comes to secretly admire it, as the story unfolds, not least because of his falling for the "good looks" (*mimo*) of Yŏng-ja, who is an acrobat in the circus troupe he repeatedly comes back to see.²²⁹ Apparently, it is only because of Yŏng-ja's beauty that he can validate circus, as a whole, as a legitimate art form. Just like the people in Hans Christian Andersen's story about the emperor's new clothes who cannot bring themselves to acknowledge the emperor's nakedness, the viewers and

²²⁹ Kim Se-yŏng, "Chakp'um ŭi yangsang kwa yŏngi" [Film's visuals and acting], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 10 (1966): 13-14.

reviewers of *Merry Ring* did not seem to notice (or mind?) that the beautiful bodies in front of them were as “naked” as they could possibly get at the time.



Figure 5.6. An acrobatic performance scene from *Merry Ring*

With comic gags and sex appeal adapted to the standards of socialist propriety under the director’s belt, one final ingredient that remained to be added to the recipe was, of course, the right kind of music. And, in this area, too, the film claimed a measure of success unmatched by most other contemporary productions. As a matter of fact, the theme music selected by the film’s creators for *Merry Ring* later becomes a default melody for all North Korean comedy films until the present day. The discussions around film music mentioned above find their way into this first successful comedy by way of an adaptation of a traditional Korean song – *onghyeya*. Originating in the agricultural songs

sung by Korean farmers in the Yŏngnam region of Korea's southeast, *onghyeya* is a common melody performed during the process of barley thrashing.

One of the film's actors recounts that the film's director, Kim Yŏng, decided that *onghyeya* would be the basis for the film's melody and tempo. Silly as it at first sounded to the cast, they were all asked by the director to go about living their daily lives outside the studio "in the *onghyeya* tempo" for a while. The actors initially raised some doubts about the possible benefits to their acting of this idiosyncratic request, but all eventually admitted that this unusual exercise played a decisive role in the success of the cast's performance, giving the film that elusive cohesiveness and flow – its inner rhythm – that cannot be achieved through adding a soundtrack alone.²³⁰

However, the full significance of this milestone production for film history can only be appreciated, if we situate it within a longer genealogy of comedy films about the circus going back to Chaplin's 1928 original picture. As Yecies and Shim point out, Chaplin comedies enjoyed an unmatched popularity in Korea already during the 1910s and 1920s, when Hollywood films widely circulated on the peninsula.²³¹ As is well known, American movies, and Chaplin films, in particular, enjoyed this popularity worldwide, including the Soviet Union, where the state-run Mosfilm studio produced its very own *Tsirk* ("Circus") in 1936 under the directorship of Grigorii Aleksandrov.

While the Soviet production paid clear tribute to the original motion picture by incorporating the very character of the Tramp in one of its opening acts, played by Nikolai Otto, it was also a departure from the American original in that, instead of relying primarily on slapstick and buffoonery, which had been the backbone of Chaplin's classic

²³⁰ Ibid., 13.

²³¹ Yecies and Shim, *Occupied Cinemas*, 70.

masterpiece, the Soviet version, interestingly enough, introduced an eroticized spectacle into the film by means of making the character of Marion Dixon, an American circus artist played by Lyubov Orlova, the centerpiece of the story, as well as of the show (Figure 5.7).



Figure 5.7. Orlova as Marion Dixon in Aleksandrov's *Tsirk* (1936)

Dressed in both revealing and seductive apparel for her circus numbers, Orlova's character is an undisputed glamour icon in this film that drives the narrative and accounts for much of the rather transparent sauciness of this classic Soviet comedy with her ceaseless singing and tap dancing. While Chaplin's *The Circus* barely makes any gesture toward acknowledging the latent sexuality of its heroine, Merna, who bashfully remains just a pretty face throughout the story, Aleksandrov's *Tsirk*, on the contrary, makes no secret of its protagonist's femininity and charisma, calling her literally a "bombshell."²³²

²³² In the film, it is also a play on the word "bombshell," which is completely lost in the Russian translation and, perhaps, on most working-class audiences, as Marion's worldwide popularity is due to her

If the only act of striptease in Chaplin's film involves a tightrope walker and the Tramp who is forced by circumstance to take his place under the dome, where in both instances the striptease is turned into a laughing matter, in the Soviet production, by contrast, disrobing is used for an altogether different effect. And yet, *Merry Ring* takes this even further by making its highly charged acrobatic performances largely the mainstay of the film's sensual appeal, nicely complementing the comic with the erotic.

In a sense, the North Korean comedy seems to be more in dialogue with Chaplin's film than with its Soviet predecessor in that it attempts to create its own version of the Tramp, unlike Aleksandrov's film, which relegated Chaplin's famous character to a marginal reference and a secondary, if not tertiary, role, letting the female performer have all the spotlight. While *Merry Ring* inherits this new interest in the erotic spectacle from its Soviet forerunner, it manages to do so without displacing the centrality of the comic. Just like Chaplin's Tramp, who is at his funniest when he has no intention to be that way, the character of Chin-gyu in the North Korean version makes us laugh, when he only means to be serious.

Both the Tramp and Chin-gyu come to their respective careers as clowns rather accidentally, with the former literally running into the ring, trying to flee from a cop who is chasing him, and the latter having to take the place of the actual clown who fails to be there for his number. Both, quite unwittingly, are catapulted into their stardom, only later coming to realize that they are the new hits of their respective shows. But what is, perhaps, most striking in this unmistakable parallel between the two clowns is that both the Tramp and his double conjure up their comic effect through a unique ability to bring

unprecedented circus act called "The Human Bombshell" or "The Human Bullet," in which she is literally fired out of a canon into the circus dome.

out the comic in the serious – one by virtue of his personality, while the other by force of the situation he finds himself in (Figure 5.8).²³³



Figure 5.8. Chin-gyu between the serious and the comic

Both roles capture something about comedy, which Alenka Zupančič has called an “‘impossible’ joint articulation” of two mutually exclusive realities. “The first and the main comic purpose of the intrusion of the other side,” she writes, “lies in what it enables in terms of juxtaposition of the two sides, their contemporaneity.”²³⁴ It is precisely this

²³³ Chin-gyu has to put on a comic act in front of the woman he has feelings for, whom he spots in the audience, which makes his debut painfully and self-consciously tragicomic.

²³⁴ Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 58.

“‘impossible’ joint articulation” that she claims to be the real comic object.²³⁵ She further elaborates on this idea:

What tragedy and comedy *do* have in common is that they are both based upon, and turn around, some fundamental discrepancy, incongruity, mismatch, discordance. [...] Tragedy structures the incongruity with the parameters and dialectics of desire [...] Desire inhabits this difference of discrepancy; it is the very name for it. Tragedy is essentially the pain of this difference. [...] [Comedy] and comic satisfaction thrive on things that do not exactly add up. They thrive on these discrepancies as a source of pleasure rather than pain.²³⁶

It is this very “‘impossible’ joint articulation” we find in Chaplin’s immortal Tramp – the juxtaposition of the serious with the comic and a source of its brilliance and its great pleasure – that the North Korean comedy so aptly takes its cue from. If in the earlier North Korean trials the two did not mesh so well, this time around, the success of the long-going theoretical quest for the elusive comic was surely in hand.

5.7 Conclusion

Chaplin’s and Monroe’s “stardom” in North Korea was, thus, far from accidental, nor is it merely a historical curiosity to be passed over. The contemporary fascination with Hollywood – its directors and celebrities, to be more precise – was an outgrowth of a changed political climate of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which forced Pyongyang to seek solutions to many of its festering problems on its own without the assistance of Moscow. As Soviet film imports dropped to an all-time low with the rift in DPRK-Soviet relations as a result of Khrushchev’s “thaw” policies which only further alienated North

²³⁵ Ibid., 59.

²³⁶ Ibid., 129-130.

Korean leadership, Pyongyang had to find new ways to win back its audiences raised on mainly Soviet cinema. The response to this new challenge was prompt, as much as it was unexpected – North Korea made a momentous decision to learn what it could from no other than Hollywood.

The interest in Hollywood's legacy was all-encompassing, but, just like in the case of early Soviet filmmakers who could not afford to waste precious film stock on film experiments, North Korean directors similarly fixed their curiosity on the successes achieved in the area of film technique and film technology, while continuing to denounce American cinema on the level of its ideological content. If South Korean filmmakers at the time poached Hollywood for resources, their North Korean colleagues held it up as a very different kind of model. What they could not do for obvious reasons was to copy Hollywood openly, adopting its visual style and narrative conventions, among other things, in the manner of South Korean filmmakers. But what they could and did do was engage in a very profound dialogue with it, which in many ways helped their efforts to develop a new genre of light comedy.

While no North Korean could go to the Soviet Union in the 1960s to learn about cinema and Western filmmaking, they could do so indirectly in a manner of a studious Confucian scholar, learning about the subject from written sources. The study of Hollywood and, more broadly, other cinemas beyond the canon of socialist practice proved to be a source of unexpected blessing – not only did it play a key role in helping create the first successful comedy film, something filmmakers had been struggling with for years, but it also was directly implicated in producing a culture of critical cinephilia.

In defining classic French cinephilia, de Baecque and Frémaux refer to it as both a way of watching films and a way of speaking about them.²³⁷ While they place more emphasis on the former, highlighting the centrality of a cinephiliac way of looking, what Paul Willemen has called a “cinephiliac moment,”²³⁸ referring to a cinephile’s eye for an unintended fragment, a marginal detail that can organize the whole experience of viewing around itself, often becoming an object of a fetishistic attachment, the diffusion of discourse on this particular experience of cinema through speaking (and writing) about it is also counted as an integral part of cinephilia.

Just like *Cahiers du Cinéma* in France, the North Korean film journal helped foster a certain type of affective and critical engagement with cinema through blurring the boundary between the professional and the amateur, the creator of images and their consumer. In part, this was due to the fact that the trade journal both addressed an industry neophyte, whose numbers surged during this period, as the film studios demanded more and more trained personnel in all areas in order to increase film production, as well as the film-lover. The mixed form of address accounts not only for discursive *heterglossia* in North Korean sources, but also helps explain the rise of critical cinephilia during this time. Part of a larger effort by the state to discipline rambunctious North Korean audiences, this “highbrow” cinephilia becomes a remedy to the problematic “lowbrow” film culture rampant throughout the 1950s. Through educating an average film-viewer in film grammar, by opening her eyes to a hidden cinematic detail or a technical nuance, *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* helped create a new locus of cinematic pleasure

²³⁷ Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 6.

²³⁸ Ibid., 7.

within the spectator, redirecting it from the purely physical to a more balanced combination of both the visceral and the cerebral.

6. Wrestling with the Grotesque



Figure 6.1. North Korean animation in the 1960s

6.1 Introduction

In the summer of 1957, Pyongyang hosted a week of Czechoslovakian animation. Over twenty animated features and shorts were presented to the North Korean public through participating theaters, including internationally acclaimed works by such renowned Czech filmmakers as Karel Zeman, Jiří Trnka, Hermína Týrlová, Eduard Hofman, and Karel Dodal. After the premiere in the country's capital, the show traveled to Kaesong and Chongjin, two major cities in the country's southwestern and northeastern regions. The festival playbill featured an animated comedy film *Král Lávra* ("King Lavra," 1950) and a selection of satirical puppet shorts about Pan Prokouk by Karel Zeman; *Veselý Cirkus* ("The Merry Circus," 1951) and *Arie Preri* ("Song of the

Prairie,” 1949), a western parody loosely based on John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, by Trnka; *Čert a Káča* (“The Devil and Kate,” 1955) by Václav Bedřich, also known as the Czech version of the story of Hansel and Gretel made into an opera by Antonín Dvořák in 1899; and many other recent productions. The films made using the cel animation process and the stop-motion technique in a variety of media, such as puppets, glass figurines, and paper cutouts, were intended for a wide audience, including children, teenagers, and adults. In addition, the program featured a few behind-the-scenes documentaries about the stop-motion process and the history of Czech puppet theater.²³⁹

In the wake of this major retrospective, which was followed by production workshops for Korean filmmakers conducted by a delegation of Czechoslovak animators,²⁴⁰ the Executive Committee of the Korean Workers’ Party Central Committee passed a resolution “On further developing the film industry” on February 7, 1958. The new law called upon industry workers to focus on the production of films promoting patriotic socialist education among the nation’s children and youth, encompassing both live-action cinema and animation.²⁴¹ Since the end of the Korean War, the North Korean film studio made only nineteen feature films, and not one of them was specifically for children.²⁴² As the industry was busy waging its war against the “cinema of fits and starts” with research into color technology, synchronized sound, and widescreen processes, the youngest members of the audience were left largely neglected. Apart from the few

²³⁹ “Ch’ek’osŭllobak’iya manhwa mit inhyŏng yŏnghwa sangyŏng chugan” [A week of Czechoslovakian drawn and puppet animation], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 7 (1957): 40-41.

²⁴⁰ Ambassador Jaroslav Olsa, Jr., interview with the author, October 19, 2013.

²⁴¹ Han, In-guk, “Adong yŏnghwa kwa yŏnghwa yesul” [Children’s films and film art], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 12 (1959): 29.

²⁴² “Chosŏn yŏnghwa chejak illam,” 58.

sporadic events, such the aforementioned festival of Czechoslovakian animation, North Korean exhibitors did not have much to offer their young patrons.

By the late 1950s, however, the North had successfully launched into its own production of children's films, and only a year after the new policy had been announced, several domestically produced pictures premiered at another film festival on the occasion of the nationwide celebration of the International Children's Day in June 1959 along with movies from the Soviet Union, China, France, and Czechoslovakia. Amid more than ten live-action features and several dozen newsreels, sports, science education, puppet, and cel animation films, one could see the first three films for children made by the national studio – *Kkoma sŏnjang* ("Little Captain," 1958), *Ŏmŏni ŭi p'um* ("In Mother's Arms," 1958), and *Tallyŏra sonyŏnho* ("School Train," 1958).²⁴³

North Korea's exposure to Czechoslovakian animation in the late 1950s, in particular, seems to have provided an impetus for the development of the national children's cinema, with the opening of the country's first full-fledged studio specializing exclusively in the production of children's films and animation in 1965 (Figure 6.1).²⁴⁴ As Pyongyang rushed to distance itself from Moscow over Khrushchev's domestic liberalization reforms, which effectively meant cutting back on any reliance on Soviet technical and financial assistance, Prague looked as an attractive alternative to take Moscow's place. Czechoslovakian cinema was receiving recognition not only in Eastern Europe at the time, but in the West, as well, as evidenced by its recent success at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival, which was reported by the North Korean film journal. Three prizes

²⁴³ "Adongdŭl ŭi myŏngjŏl ŭl kinyŏmhayŏ adong yŏnghwa sang'yŏng" [Screening children's films in celebration of Children's Day], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1959): 24.

²⁴⁴ "Adong yŏnghwa ch'walyŏngso ga nawatta" [The founding of the studio of children's films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 8 (1965): 34.

went that year to Czechoslovakian directors, including the festival's top award – Palme d'Or, the Golden Palm Branch – for Miro Bernat's short film *Motýli tady nežíjí* ("Butterflies Don't Live Here," 1958) and a Distinction for Jiří Trnka's feature film *Sen svatojáns noci* ("A Midsummer Night's Dream," 1959).²⁴⁵

Inspired by the international success of Czechoslovakian filmmakers, Pyongyang decides to move into its own animation production. In late 1958, the national film studio sets up an experimental animation workshop. Coming from backgrounds in painting, sculpture, and plastic arts, the members of this group had no prior experience in filmmaking and had to learn the ropes on their own without much help from the outside. Cho Kyu-söp, who was a member of this group, recalls later that they had neither textbooks, nor the necessary equipment when they first started their research into animation processes and had to analyze films made by others frame by frame in order to establish the most basic principles of animation and learn how to use them on their own. They would learn special cinematographic techniques from their colleagues in live-action film production, which they would then apply to animation, Cho intimates. In the end, the team produced its first experimental puppet film, *Uri tongsan* ("Our hill").²⁴⁶

Although subsequent productions by the animation group were all released to the wide audience, unlike the first experimental film, there was still a great deal of both practical and theoretical issues waiting to be solved over the next decade – largely through trial and error. The first six years of this period – from 1959 until the establishment of a separate studio specializing in animation and children's films in 1965

²⁴⁵ "12ch'a Kannü kukche yŏnghwa ch'ukchŏn" [12th Cannes international film festival], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1959): 24.

²⁴⁶ Cho Kyu-söp, "Uriga kŏrŏ on kil" [The road we have taken], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1966): 21.

– must be, therefore, viewed as experimental in the history of North Korean animation. Central among the issues that creators of children’s films were grappling with were the questions of medium specificity and child psychology. Interestingly, the problem of the comic would emerge time and again at the very heart of these two major debates.

The previous chapter demonstrated how the industry responded to the challenges of the misplaced comic engendered by the “cinema of fits and starts” by developing a genre of “light comedy” (*kyŏng hŭigŭk*) and promoting a particular kind of critical cinephilia. The same approach, however, proved ineffective with children, forcing the film establishment to turn to the study of child cognitive development, instead, all the while the newly minted animators were knee-deep in research and experimentation with the new medium. The inquiry into children’s cognitive processes was framed in terms of two interrelated concepts – that of *tongsim* (literally, “child-heart), which can be broadly construed as child psychology, and that of *hŭngmi* (literally, “interest”) in the sense of attractiveness and appeal.

Simply put, the industry sought how to make films that would gain the love and admiration of the child spectator and from which he would take away precisely what the authors intended. If the young adult spectator had the freedom to *consciously* poach his movies, encouraged by the very nature of the theatrical experience at the time, as elaborated in chapter 2, the child viewer, by contrast, would simply take his cues the wrong, often, the opposite way, unwittingly creating spurious counter-readings of the official text, if not a counter-text altogether.

As children’s films and especially animation were commonly steeped in allegory, widespread misreadings became a pervasive phenomenon with early children’s

productions throughout most of the 1960s, a problem that could only be solved by understanding the workings of the child's heart and mind (*tongsim*). As this chapter will elaborate, this kind of textual poaching by young audiences resulting in nearly a semantic reversal of the original text was enabled by certain failures that accompanied this experimental stage, giving rise to the audiovisual uncanny and the animated grotesque. It was the fight against these unintended uncanny and grotesque effects that helped define the place of the comic in North Korean cinema and society at large for years to come.

6.2 Understanding the “Child-Heart”

The idea that children need their own stories told in a language they can understand and built on tropes they are familiar with is by no means new and can be found virtually anywhere. North Korea's discourse on child psychology was no exception. Although it was first articulated in the early 1960s, when the industry began to expand into the production of children's films and animation, interest in child psychology has its roots in the colonial period, which, for the first time, witnessed a massive growth of children's literature through the proliferation of new journals and magazines published specifically for young readers. It is also then that the myth of childhood innocence entered the Korean literary imagination through contemporary Japanese discourses on *dōshin*, or the “child-heart.”²⁴⁷

Despite the fact that this idealized essentialization of the childhood experience invited harsh criticism from proletarian writers both in Japan and Korea at the time, the

²⁴⁷ Samuel Perry, “Aesthetics for Justice: Proletarian Literature in Japan and Colonial Korea” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago 2007).

concept quickly took hold and became popularized through mainstream literary production. This romanticized representation of the child as intrinsically pure, innocent, and artless was inherited in North Korean discourses on “child interiority” (*tongsim segye*). As filmmakers were busy creating new positive heroes for their children’s films according to the tenets of the socialist realist art theory, the myth of childhood innocence came in handy in setting up the necessary conflict between good and evil.

However, the newly promoted emphasis on representational “truthfulness” (*chinsilsŏng*) and “appeal” (*hŭngmi*) of children’s films and animation led to an important revision of the concept of *tongsim*, which had far-reaching implications for North Korean cinema, as a whole. While the socialist child was still constructed as simple, pure, and innocent, the new theory also characterized him through playfulness and mischief. The new vision was largely the product of repeated failures to create attractive positive heroes that children would identify with and hold up for positive role models. Film critics had to admit the inconvenient truth that could no longer be ignored suggesting that positive heroes in contemporary children’s films were mostly ineffective, while negative characters were in many ways more appealing and attractive, resulting in an inverse audience response.

Playfulness and mischief were initially viewed as negative character traits which the child would gradually overcome through socialization and education. This outlook manifests itself both in writings on children’s cinema and in the early productions of the late 1950s and early 1960s. For instance, one of the first children’s films produced in the North, *Tallyŏra sonyŏnho* (“School Train,” 1958), tells a story of a “spoiled” boy, Chae-su. Raised by his indulgent grandmother in the countryside, Chae-su is used to having his

every wish fulfilled. When one day the boy moves to Pyongyang where his parents live, he has to adjust to a new life and a new collective at school. However, on his first day at a new school instead of joining other students after classes in a school-wide scrap metal collection campaign, he chooses to spend his afternoon strolling along the Taedong river and shopping at one of the department stores with his grandma. Chae-su is criticized for alienating himself from others and not putting the interests of the group before his own. In the course of the story, however, this “very liberal boy” (*aju chayujuŭijŏgin sonyŏn*) realizes his personal shortcomings and resolves to reform his ways.²⁴⁸

In another early children’s film, *Ŏmŏni ŭi p’um* (“In Mother’s Arms”), the main protagonist, Myŏng-su, befriends Chun-ho at school, who is a bad influence on him. Together the two boys “sabotage” (*t’aegong*) after-school work weeding an apple orchard and run away to play, instead. As part of their adventures, they go fishing, and in the evening they sneak into a warehouse to steal some carbide.²⁴⁹ Again, boyish mischief is viewed here decidedly critically as something that gets in the way of the social good. Based on a 1958 short novel by Kang Hyo-sun, *Ssang mujigae* (“A double rainbow”), which tells of Myŏng-su’s gradual reform, the film departs from its literary source, as some dissatisfied viewers pointed out in their letters to the journal, in that, unlike the book, the film version depicts the boy consistently in negative terms as a “brat”

²⁴⁸ “Adong yesul yŏnghwa ‘Tallyŏra sonyŏnho’” [Children’s feature film “School Train”], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 2 (1959): 14-15.

²⁴⁹ “Adong yesul yŏnghwa ‘Ŏmŏni ŭi p’um’” [Children’s feature film “In Mother’s Arms”], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 2 (1959): 26.

(*pullang'a*) and a “troublemaker” (*malssŏng'kun*) rather than showing the audience the character’s positive transformation.²⁵⁰

Viewing childhood play, with its antics, pranks, and mischief, as a transgressive social act in need of both moral rectification and disciplinary response caused an immediate backlash from spectators, educators, and critics, calling into question the effectiveness of such approach. Mischief among young children is by no means unusual, and North Korean children, in that sense, are no different from kids anywhere else. Kang Chol-hwan, who spent his childhood years living in the North Korean capital in the 1950s, recalls in his famous memoir, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, his frequent fights with other neighborhood boys and territorial wars with Soviet embassy children:

We watched with hostile curiosity as the group of foreign-tongued blond children walked through our neighborhood. We would harass them and try to pull their hair, and they’d push us aside or run away; but somehow the clumsy overtures never broke into a general melee. Yet when it came to fighting among ourselves, we never let an opportunity slip. I was a difficult child – stubborn, vindictive, determined – never missing an opportunity to measure myself up against a competitor. My fights were sometimes stopped by my grandfather, who absolutely adored me. If I was on the short end of a brawl, he would break it up and call both me and my adversary hooligans, but whenever he saw I had the upper hand, he stayed out of it – beaming with pride.²⁵¹

That was the case in the 1950s, and that was still the case in the 1980s. One of the characters in Barbara Demick’s fascinating account of everyday lives in North Korea, Mrs. Song, recalls that the young boys who used to hang around the train station in

²⁵⁰ Hŏ, Sŏng-hae, “Adong yesul yŏnghwa ‘Ŏmŏni ūi p’um’ ūn sosŏl poda mot hamnida” [Children’s feature film “In Mother’s Arms” fails compared to the novel], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 3 (1959): 27.

²⁵¹ Kang and Rigoulot, *Aquariums of Pyongyang*, 7.

Chongjin in the 1980s looking for food were “mischievous” and “wild.”²⁵² While the two examples belong to different periods of North Korean history, what they both have in common is the fact that at a certain age children simply tend to look for mischief and trouble regardless of family and social circumstances.

The state, however, would not take this mischief lightly. In the eyes of the authorities, the line between deliberate tomfoolery and innocuous play was what separated a bona fide troublemaker from a good citizen. In reality, however, these divisions were often completely subjective and arbitrary. The worry, of course, on part of North Korean educators was that, if left without a disciplinary intervention at an early stage, these character flaws would most certainly lead to outright delinquency in the future. Thus, the tension between positive and negative heroes in contemporary literature and film was meant to eliminate any possibility of today’s underage jesters turning into tomorrow’s lawbreaking hooligans. Ironically, though, taking the mischief out of the child and projecting it onto the story’s negative Other only led to making the positive heroes look uninteresting, unrealistic, and unappealing, while bestowing, if unwittingly, all the charisma on the bad guys.²⁵³

6.3 The Uncanny in Early Children’s Films

Letters flooded the editorial office of *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* expressing frustration with the type of positive heroes portrayed in recent children’s films. Yu Chŏng-ok, a teacher at

²⁵² Demick, *Nothing to Envy*, 161.

²⁵³ Chŏn Ki-yŏng, “Adong yesul yŏnghwa esŏ chŏnhyŏngjŏk sŏngkyŏk ūi ch’angjo” [Creating model characters in children’s feature films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 2 (1960): 4-5.

one of Pyongyang schools, complained that the protagonist of *Tallyŏra sonyŏnho* (“School Train”) – a boy named Sŏng-ho – comes across as “artificial and distorted” (*inwijŏgimyŏ woegoktoen kŏt*), whereas the homeroom teacher in the movie strikes one as a “stiff person” (*ttakttakhan saram*) compared to whom even the truck driver, a minor character in the film who helps the students with their scrap metal collection drive, feels “far more friendly” (*hwolssin ch’ingŭnhada*).²⁵⁴

Another disappointed viewer grumbled that, in fact, all the child characters in *Tallyŏra sonyŏnho*, and not just the schoolteacher, felt “stiff” (*ttakttakhamyŏ*). There is hardly anything childlike about these kids, Ri goes on to say, and the way they speak is so “unnatural” (*chayŏn sŭropchido mothamyŏ*), certainly not how one would expect a child to speak. There is something oddly “mechanical” about these kids (*kigyejŏgŭro toeyŏ itta*) who never make any mistakes and are overall perfect students, he concludes.²⁵⁵ Commenting on the same film, another young reader pointed out in a letter that “these kids look nothing like children at our school.”²⁵⁶

Michel Chion, a French scholar who has prolifically written on sound in cinema, has proposed a concept of acousmatic sound. Chion defines acousmatic sound as the sound detached from its originating source. Radio, phonograph, and telephone, for example, the devices that transmit sounds without revealing their originating source, are all acousmatic media par excellence. In cinema, Chion writes, “[a] sound or voice that

²⁵⁴ Yu Chŏng-ok, “Yŏnghwa ‘Tallyŭra Sonyŏnho’ e taehan ŭigyŏn” [An opinion on the film “School Train”], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 3 (1959): 27.

²⁵⁵ Ri Yun-ho, “Kyoyangjŏk kyŏnji esŏ ŭi myŏtkaji ŭigyŏn” [Some thoughts from the pedagogical point of view], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 2 (1959): 16.

²⁵⁶ Chŏng Myŏng-gi, “Adong yesul yŏnghwa e nat’anan kyŏlham myŏt kaji” [Some weaknesses in children’s feature films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 3 (1959): 11-12.

remains acousmatic creates a mystery of the nature of its source, its properties and its powers.” It is common to have evil, awe-inspiring characters, he adds, introduced through sound before they are subsequently made visible.²⁵⁷ Such acousmatic characters, or *acousmétres*, as he calls them, whose disembodied voice presence is based on their very physical absence in the image, can be encountered in many mystery and suspense films, such as Fritz Lang’s *Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, and Stanley Kubrick’s *2001, A Space Odyssey*.²⁵⁸

Based on Chion’s typology, the uncanny associated with the “unnatural” speech of child characters in early North Korean youth films, then, is closest to what he calls the “effect of *phantom sound*” associated with an acousmatic phenomenon, that is, when a sound naturally expected in a given situation becomes suddenly or insidiously suppressed.²⁵⁹ In our case, the suppression of the natural sound associated with child speech inevitably creates a sense of defamiliarization, estrangement, and uncanniness, repeatedly described in North Korean sources by such terms as “awkward” (*ōsaekhada*), “stiff” (*ttakttakhada*), and “unfamiliar” (*saenggyōnghada*).

The problem of the uncanny in image and sound was not confined to a handful of fiction films. A children’s documentary, *Uri nūn haengbokhaeyo* (“We are happy”), for instance, which showed the social life of children in Kaesong around their activities at the local children’s cultural center, received harsh criticism for its many “artificial” scenes

²⁵⁷ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 71-72.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 129-131.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

(*inwijŏgŭro kkumyŏ*) that created a “sense of awkwardness” (*ŏsaekhan kam*).²⁶⁰ The same article lashed out against a newsreel film for children, *Ŏrin toksŏga* (“Little Wonder Kids,” *Chosŏn sonyŏn*), for a contrived portrayal of the life of elementary school students. Instead of showing the children in their true element playing and having fun, everything they do in the film, the critic charged, looks staged and insincere. The newsreel depicts them riding the bus, sitting on benches in the park, immersed in reading books in the library and study, always serious and contemplative, looking more like adults than truly children. It is hard to imagine children’s lives more ossified by overly rational rules and formalities without any hint of genuine emotion, the author laments, than in this film.²⁶¹

Some blamed this uncanny representation of children on film on directorial oversight: most films at the time starred children who were not professional actors, and directors seem to have had a hard time getting them to act naturally in front of a movie-camera. Stilted acting by child performers was interpreted as a sign of the director’s failure to put them at ease and help them step out of their shell. Simply explaining to child actors what they must do in front of the camera, one critic argued, as one would with adult professional actors, would be completely counterproductive. In order to succeed with child actors the critic recommended that film directors engage them in a certain form of make-believe play, eliciting the memories of their emotional experiences (*chŏngsŏjŏk kiŏk*) that would be relevant to a particular scene. In other words, the child would be asked first to remember and then to reproduce a certain experience from his or her own life when he or she felt happy, sad, frightened, angry, etc. But, even then the

²⁶⁰ Ri Kyŏng-ch’an, “Mŏnjŏ tongsim segye ro tora kara” [First return to the world of child-heart], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1964): 39-40.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

presence of the camera and the filming crew made the child's momentary retreat into an imaginary space of personal memories and pretense play always a precarious business.²⁶²

Others saw the root of the problem in poor screenwriting. Both screenwriters and authors of children's literature were often unfamiliar with the modern realities of children's life, their detractors argued, creating unrealistic depictions based on some abstract ideas or on their personal childhood experiences that could hardly resonate with the experiences of the new generation. The resulting uncanny effect, then, was not simply a product of camera fright or poor training, as some would claim, which, after all, could be remedied through practice and experience, but was, in fact, a much deeper issue of distorted representation. Another critic, An Ch'ang-u, bemoaned the absence of spontaneity and verisimilitude in contemporary filmic representations of children, remarking that making them look, sound, and act like adults prevents subject identification with these characters and makes them akin to eerie automatons.²⁶³

It is hardly surprising, then, that, to the studio's great dismay, the first children's films made domestically were a big flop. Their poor performance at the box-office was largely a result of failure to create universally attractive protagonists with whom audiences could identify. Unanticipated viewer alienation from what were supposed to become positive role models, as the flood of dissatisfied letters indicates, was the exact opposite of official intentions. The combined effect of rigid, unnatural acting and uncharacteristic, awkward dialogue the child performers delivered in accordance with

²⁶² Ri Ŭng-jin, "Adong yŏn'gija wa yŏnch'ulga" [Child actors and the director], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 7 (1964): 14-16.

²⁶³ An Ch'ang-u, "Nyŏllyŏng – simnijŏk t'ŭksŏng kwa hŭngmi munje: Adong kirok yŏnghwa rŭl chungsim ŭro" [Peculiarities associated with age and affective development and the problem of appeal: focusing on children's documentary films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1966): 23.

their contrived roles created a sort of audiovisual uncanny. Compared to these humanoid automatons, negative characters appeared more realistic and relatable and, therefore, more likeable, to the great consternation of filmmakers and critics. Endowing positive heroes with grown-up seriousness and negative characters with infantile mischief betrayed gross misunderstanding of subject formation and identification processes in children. No wonder patrons would naturally feel more affinity for the far more credible and interesting antagonists of the first children's films.

6.4 Managing Onscreen Mischief

While the audiovisual uncanny robbed insipid positive characters of their already dwindling appeal, the boisterousness and mischievousness of negative heroes, by contrast, made them the objects of ever-growing popularity. Students of child psychology argued that it is only natural for children to make fun of everything and everyone and turn even serious matter into play. A lecturer at Sariwŏn Teachers College, Kim Ryŏn-sik, explained in an article appearing in *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* that before reaching a certain age children tend to follow their impulses more than reason. Thus, while in the movies, they can burst out laughing at the most inappropriate moment, when one would be expected to drop a few tears, or make fun of the way certain characters speak and move.²⁶⁴ In other words, the expert insisted that there was absolutely nothing wrong with the way some children (mis)behaved in the cinema.

²⁶⁴ Kim Ryŏn-sik, "Adong kyoyuk kwa yŏnghwa" [Children's education and cinema], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 7 (1967): 32-33.

Of course, the last thing filmmakers wanted was to add fuel to the fire by furnishing additional opportunities for levity and mischief, even if that kind of response was natural and only to be expected. But, there was a price to pay for that decision. Since negative characters were habitually portrayed through simplification and exaggeration of their negative traits, their dramatic representations were usually deliberately diminishing and comical at the same time. These caricature portrayals, no doubt, scored higher with children and teenagers than the lifeless paragons of perfection they were bid to follow, providing a natural affective hook for the audience. The comicalized anti-heroes both commanded the young patron's interest and provided perfect material for all kinds of spoofs, leading critics to raise concerns that the "humorous criticism" (*haehakchögin pip'an*) through which they are depicted becomes hijacked and misused by the child spectator for "pure amusement" (*tansunhan hŭngmi*).²⁶⁵

The continuing debate revealed an implicit consensus among the majority of writers, filmmakers, and educators that through the mimetic activities of child play children necessarily internalize various behavioral models associated with the roles they enact. In other words, no mimetic act, no matter how trivial or unserious it may appear to be, can ever remain without consequences for the child's development. Along these lines, the director of *The Merry Ring*, Kim Yöng, strongly advised against the use of coarse language in children's films, even if the filmmaker should feel it was necessary for the sake of a realistic representation, lest the child in the audience learns from the bad

²⁶⁵ Kim Kōl, "Örinidül ege hyöngmyöngjök chuje üi yörökaji yönghwa rül! (Adong yönghwa rül yöñch'ul hamyönsö chegihanün munje)" [Various films on revolutionary topics for little children! (Questions arising when directing children's films)], *Chosŏn yönghwa* 2 (1967): 37.

example.²⁶⁶ In his own films, Kim was always very cautious in this regard not to set any risky precedent, relying, instead, on methods of slapstick and physical comedy to create a comic effect.

However, the desire to keep North Korean screens free from anything that could suggest bad manners or delinquent behavior was highly unrealistic. After years of unrestricted access to literally any movie that played in local theaters, children would express little interest in going to see overly schematic and moralizing films the studio made for them in the late 1950s. When the first domestic productions for children premiered across the country, including *Tallyŏra sonyŏnho* (“School Train”), *Ŏmŏni ũi p’um* (“In Mother’s Arms”), *Pulgŭn nekt’ai* (“Red Scarf”), *Ri Su-bok* (“Hero Li Su-bok”), and others, only 30 to 40 percent of the total student population came to see them in some provinces. Distributors were concerned that their films were not reaching their intended audiences and debated the measures to raise attendance among school students. One of the suggestions was to promote the use of children’s films in the classroom in addition to other instructional materials used by teachers.²⁶⁷

Creating a captive audience, however, could hardly be the solution to the problem of attractiveness, nor was it always clear how one should incorporate these feature films into the learning process. Unlike more subject-focused “science education films” (*kwahak pogŭp yŏnghwa*) and “instructional films” (*kyonjae yŏnghwa*) that were meant to supplement curricular technology and production training in the schools, fiction films,

²⁶⁶ Kim Yŏng, “Adong simni segye wa yŏnch’ul hyŏngsang” [The child’s emotional world and film directing], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 11 (1964): 32.

²⁶⁷ Ch’oe Kong-ok, “Ch’ŏngsonyŏndŭl sok esŏ yŏnghwa pogŭp saŏp ŭl kaesŏnhaja!” [Let’s improve film work for children and youth!], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1960): 12-13.

while they could be shown to a wider audience, also required more careful, and often tailored, exposition based on the age and educational level of the group watching it.²⁶⁸

In a way, the situation with the distribution and exhibition of early children's films could be seen as an extension of the "cinema of fits and starts" described in chapter 2. While many children's films simply did not reach theaters, collecting dust in provincial distribution centers, those that did were neither marked, nor publicized as films for younger audiences. More importantly, however, these films were not accompanied by explanatory lectures or discussions before or after the screening, as was the case with all other films, especially those shown through worksite cinemas. And on those rare occasions when they were presented with an accompanying lecture, film interpreters would often fail to distinguish between the different age groups in the audience and their intellectual levels, providing the same authoritative reading of the text to elementary and high school students alike.²⁶⁹

The gravest problem, however, was the common practice of admitting children to any show without regard to the fact of whether the film was appropriate for their age or not. Often, parents would bring their kids to the cinema with them or, conversely, show little interest in what movies their children went to see on their own. Without parental cooperation and parents' personal interest in cinema, in the first place, it was next to impossible, critics argued, to reverse the existing practice. In order to assist children with correct film understanding, parents and teachers had not only to be more involved with the children's extracurricular life, but they also had to be avid cinephiles themselves and

²⁶⁸ "Ch'ŏngsomyŏndŭl e taehan sahoejuŭi chŏk aegukchŭŭi kyoyang kwa yŏnghwa," [Socialist patriotic education and films for children and youth], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 4 (1958): 8-10.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 9.

watch movies on a regular basis to know what would be suitable for their kids and what could be detrimental for their development.²⁷⁰

Looking across the border at South Korea convinced Pyongyang even more to take the matter to heart. In November of 1964, *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* reported a rise in juvenile crime in the South. The article blamed Park Chung Hee's heedless film policy that let children freely see "dirty Yankee films" (*ch'ujaphan yangk'i yŏnghwa*) in promoting "criminal activity" (*pŏmjoe haengwi*) among the country's youth. The article quoted a report originally published in *Taejŏn Ilbo* newspaper on August 23 of that year telling that after seeing Richard Fleischer's *Barabba* (1961) and Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), "many kids would gather and loiter restlessly outside the movie theater," while one lad "after seeing [this kind of] films went home and made himself a knife, and now he gets into knife fights every day."²⁷¹

The fears voiced by the North Korean side were not completely unfounded. With the rise of the "dangerous youth" films in the second half of the 1950s in the wake of Nicholas Ray's 1955 classic *Rebel Without a Cause* starring James Dean, the American movie industry found itself embroiled in a major controversy at home over the role played by cinema in juvenile delinquency. Just like their North Korean counterparts, parents, public officials, and the media in the United States perceived teen-oriented exploitation pics to be an "authentic threat to the social order," despite Hollywood's efforts to justify all portrayals of juvenile mayhem and violence with formulaic

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 10.

²⁷¹ "Ŏrinidŭl ege yangk'i yŏnghwa rŭl kwallam sik'yŏ pŏmjoe haengwi rŭl chojanghanŭn Pak Chŏng-hŭi todang ŭi 'Sonyŏn sŏndo'" [Park Chung Hee's gang forces little children to watch Yankee films and encourages criminal activities], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 11 (1964): 37.

Production Code finales celebrating the triumph of law and order.²⁷² Regardless of the actual cause-effect relationship between filmic violence and youth delinquency, Pyongyang was determined to prevent any potential misconduct among its moviegoing children and teenagers by banning depictions of transgressive behavior from its screens.

6.5 Misfit Toys and the Animated Grotesque

Animation, on the other hand, was seen as being in a separate category from live-action cinema, which meant that the laws of realism did not apply to it with the same rigor as they did to action films. A genre founded on exaggeration and fantasy, it was far removed from the representational realism of live-action cinema. Animated films could show things that were purely fantastical with the artistic license the other art form did not possess. Although the first drawn animation was not produced in North Korea until 1961, satirical cartoons – a precursor in many ways of drawn animation – had been common in Korea already during the colonial period. Many colonial-era periodicals, such as *Chosŏn Ilbo* and *Donga Ilbo*, regularly featured cartoons both by professional cartoonists and by amateur artists. In North Korea, the tradition was continued by a popular satirical journal, *Hwa(l)sal* (“Arrow”), published from 1946 through the early 1960s.²⁷³

Employing the technique of the grotesque, these cartoons, or *manhwa* in Korean, constituted, essentially, the art of political caricature. Already in 1920s and 1930s, as

²⁷² For more, see: “Dangerous Youth” in Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002): 83-114.

²⁷³ The first issue of the magazine was published in August 1946 under the name of *Horang’i* (“Tiger”). In January 1948, the name was changed to *Hwalsal* (“Arrow”) and in 1959 it was changed again to *Hwasal*, without affecting the meaning.

Chung has shown, the comic of the political cartoon becomes imbricated with the abject owing to increasing representations of non-normative positions identified with colonial, proletarian, and other forms of marginalized subjectivity.²⁷⁴ Pyongyang's promotion of satire during the 1950s as a weapon of ideological war against imperialism, feudalism, and superstition further reinforced the link between the comic and the abject.

When it came to cinematic representations, however, the fear of putting the abject on the big screen was not without reason. Critics were alarmed that, contrary to their expectations, some anti-American films produced by the North Korean studio in the 1950s, which showed caricaturized images of the enemy, failed to stir up hatred and outrage among younger viewers. For instance, an action film made during the Korean War, *Sonyŏn ppaltchisan* ("Young partisans," 1951), was criticized for having prompted "reckless adventurism" (*ŏngttunghan mohŏmsim*) among adolescent filmgoers, while terrifying younger children in the audience with naturalistic scenes of U.S. military atrocities.²⁷⁵

Showing the gruesome and the grisly as part of the fantastical world created by the artist and populated largely by non-human characters, however, was fundamentally different from trying to stage it with real actors in live-action cinema. But even then one could never be certain how abject representations would affect an individual child spectator. If live-action cinema's portrayal of the abject could both intimidate younger children and incite reckless actions among adolescents, animation's portrayal of the

²⁷⁴ Kimberly Mee Chung, "Mass Politics and Visual Culture: Proletarian Literature of 1920s and 1930s Colonial Korea" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2011).

²⁷⁵ Hong Kŏn, "Adongdŭl e taehan sahoejuŭijŏk aegukchuŭi kyoyang kwa yŏnghwa" [Socialist patriotic education and films about children], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1959): 23.

fantastical abject, on the other hand, stimulated unwelcome parodying and mimicry. For instance, after seeing *Kkoma hwaga* (“Boy Artist”), which tells a story of a young painter who is haunted in his dream by the sloppy images of soccer players he had painted for the school wall gazette, some children began reenacting the “deformed” (*kihyŏngjŏgin*) visitors from the boy’s dream in their games, parodying their outlandish movements, appearance, and even laughter (Figure 6.2). Another animation, *Tu adongdanwŏn* (“Two Boy Scouts”), which featured several Japanese characters with a comically exaggerated accent, made some young viewers copy for the fun of it.²⁷⁶



Figure 6.2. A scene from *Boy Artist*

²⁷⁶ Kim, “Örinidŭl ege hyŏngmyŏngjŏk chuje ũi yŏrŏkaji yŏnghwa rŭl!” 37.

The above examples capture the dilemma faced by North Korean filmmakers at the time. On the one hand, without the comic and the abject, intrinsic to the medium itself, animations were little different from the period's uncanny children's films – it is only that the same mistakes were repeated in a new form. On the other hand, if the filmmaker were to be true to the nature of the medium, there would always be, at least, some possibility of textual poaching. And, indeed, animators at first followed the same dead-end route taken by their colleagues in live-action production creating overtly moralizing and overly serious films without much regard to child psychology. Critics were quick to lambaste them as “abridged versions of fiction films” (*yesul yŏnghwa ŭi ch'uksop'an*), while puzzled viewers, reportedly, shrugged their shoulders as to why those stories had to assume the form of animation.²⁷⁷

Contemporary critics argued that children's animation was contiguous with the world of fairy tales, legends, and myths, and for that reason, the fantastical elements of animation must be expressed only with the techniques of exaggeration and fantasy. The fantastical cannot be adequately portrayed by live actors in action cinema without compromising the “realism of representation” (*chinsilsŏng*) and without turning the fantastic into the comic.²⁷⁸ Therefore, all instances of the fantastic and the imaginary had to be channeled through an appropriate medium, and animation was regarded to be the art form best suited for that purpose. Conversely, everything that was not part of the fantastic, but was part of the real world could be best portrayed by live-action cinema and its realist method.

²⁷⁷ Kim, “Adong simni wa hyŏngsang supŏp,” 19-20.

²⁷⁸ Kim Su-ryong, “Manhwa, inhyŏng yŏnghwa ŭi hyŏngsangjŏk t'ŭksŏng” [Representational peculiarities of drawn and puppet animation films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 1 (1967): 30.

As a result of these conflicting pressures, North Korean animators tried to find ways to overcome the comic and normalize the fantastic, just as their counterparts in children's live-action filmmaking struggled to create positive heroes that would appeal to the taste of the child and serve as effective role models. But, if the mistakes the latter group made resulted in the fortuitous production of the audiovisual uncanny, the mistakes animators made backfired in the form of the inadvertent grotesque. In his famous essay "The Uncanny," Freud points out an interesting connection between the uncanny and the comic. He writes that an uncanny situation that would otherwise arouse feelings of unease or even fright can be transformed into something "irresistibly comic" by means of grotesque exaggeration and other techniques.²⁷⁹ This seems to be precisely what happened with early North Korean animated films. The import of the unintended uncanny into the medium founded on the technique of exaggeration resulted in its inevitable transmogrification into the "irresistibly comic."

Describing his experience creating first animation films in North Korea, Cho Kyu-sŏp states that his team quickly learnt that "without a considerable degree of exaggeration it is impossible to clearly convey continuity of movement or important subtle motions." After repeated failures to achieve the desired result, animation artists in his group were finally able to succeed in depicting character movements only after they used human models to dissect the patterns of locomotion.²⁸⁰ Another method adopted later was to time one's own movements using a stopwatch and a full-body mirror. In order to get facial expressions and movements right every artist additionally had a small

²⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003): 144, 158. Freud provides examples of Mark Twain and Oscar Wilde transforming the uncanny situations into the comic.

²⁸⁰ Cho, "Uriga kŏrŏ on kil," 22.

mirror placed on his or her desk. In certain situations, scenes that were particularly challenging would be first shot with live actors, often in full costume and with makeup on. That footage would then be sent to story artists (*tonghwa misulga*) who would analyze the actors' movements and translate them into the lines of their initial drawings. The whole process of creating a drawn animation film involved over 50 stages.²⁸¹

Pyongyang soon discovered that making drawn animation films was not only labor-intensive, but capital- and technology-intensive, as well. In order to make one reel of drawn animation, which is about ten minutes long when projected, requires at least 30,000 drawings and the work of many artists with various specialized skills. Neither the special pigments used in the coloring process, nor the resin necessary to make the celluloid sheets essential for the production of cel animation were domestically manufactured at the time and had to be all imported from abroad, which, of course, added to the looming production costs.²⁸² Compared to drawn animation, stop-motion animation, on the other hand, using puppets or paper cutouts required neither as much time, nor as many resources. That was especially true of paper cutout animation, which could be produced at a fraction of a cost of drawn or puppet animation. The country's first paper cutout film, *Kkamjang t'okki* ("Black Rabbit"), was made in 1963 by a group of four animators with minimal art supplies and only one camera. The film was one reel long, and the whole process took under two months (Figure 6.3).²⁸³

²⁸¹ Cho Myŏng, "T'omak chisik: Kūrim ūro toen yŏnghwa (kūrim yŏnghwa)" [Learning in bits and pieces: a film made of drawings (drawn animation)], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 12 (1966): 31.

²⁸² "Ch'ŏnyŏnsaek manhwa yŏnghwa '500 man t'on'" [Color drawn film "5 million tons"], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 10 (1961): 20-22.

²⁸³ Chŏn Ch'ang-gyu, "T'omak chisik: chihyŏng yŏnghwa" [Learning in bits and pieces: paper cutout films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 8 (1963): 30-31.

The rise in animated film production during the first half of the 1960s necessitated the parallel development of other industries. Animators had to work closely with various factories and laboratories, so that expensive imported technology and materials could be replaced with a reliable flow of domestically produced analogues in the nearest future. When the experimental animation group was formed, the animators did not even have a stop-motion camera to work with, which they had to devise and build themselves from scratch.²⁸⁴ Many materials essential to animation production, including special inks, paints, glues, resins, plastics, and paper, were either not available locally or were of inferior quality. Often, materials that were cheaper or found in greater abundance in the North, such as graphite and carbamide resin, were used in place of more traditional ones out of economic considerations.²⁸⁵



Figure 6.3. A scene from *Black Rabbit* (1963)

²⁸⁴ Rim Hong-ŭn, “Inhyŏng yŏnghwa ‘Singihan poksung’a’ rŭl mandŭlgi kkaji” [Making a puppet film “Marvelous Peach”], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1961): 35.

²⁸⁵ ““500 man t’on,”” 22.

It is no wonder, then, that until all the aspects of the production process were finally streamlined by the end of the decade, many animations produced by the studio were not always up to par. Puppet and paper cutout films seem to have been especially prone to expose some of the constructional imperfections and productional fault lines of the process, drawing unwanted audience attention to the aspects that were meant to remain hidden. Many critics commented on unnaturally heavy and slow movements of 3D models of stop-motion animation that had hardly anything in common with the lightness and sprightliness of the child. There were times when the parts of the model that were not supposed to move moved and, conversely, those that were supposed to move did not, making the animation effect look “strange” (*koesanghan*) and even “absurd” (*öngt’öri ömnün*). Another problem was the lack of differentiation in the types of movement of various characters despite their differences in age, gender, and class, all moving in the same way.²⁸⁶

Throughout the early 1960s, stop-motion animations frequently erred not only in coming off as cumbersome, awkward, and klutzy, as far as the movement of puppets was concerned, but also as grotesque in appearance. Critics bemoaned these misfit toys for their unpurposeful monstrosity, which allegedly jarred on the child’s delicate senses. Instead of being deliberately pretty and cute, the puppets were said to have been notoriously “poorly made” (*chojaphage chejaktoemyö*) to the point that they “even appeared misshapen” (*kihyöngjögin kösüro nükkige kkaji*)²⁸⁷ Whether out of desire to amuse or out of material constraints or, perhaps, both, it was not uncommon for puppets

²⁸⁶ Rim, “Inhyöng yönghwa ‘Singihan poksung’a,’” 35.

²⁸⁷ Kim Köl, “Manhwa, inhyöng yönghwa esö üi tongsim segye üi ch’ugu” [Chasing the world of the child-heart in drawn and puppet animation], *Chosön yönghwa* 6 (1965): 38.

to be missing a finger or two, have rags for beards, or show some kind of odd deformity (Figure 6.4).²⁸⁸ Whereas this might have flown well with more seasoned adult audiences familiar with the tradition of political cartoon and caricature and its conventions, the child and the adolescent for whom these films were made were more likely to be misguided than properly edified, the concerned educators wailed. Animators were constantly reminded of the child's natural inclination to poach whatever s/he sees on the big screen for the sake of "amusement" (*yuhŭi haengdong*).²⁸⁹



Figure 6.4. A four-fingered puppet

Furthermore, pundits argued that speaking puppets, whether they moved their lips or not, looked extremely unnatural, calling on screenwriters to keep dialogue in this kind

²⁸⁸ Kim, "Örinidül ege hyöngmyöngjök chuje ūi yörökaji yönghwa rül!," 36-37.

²⁸⁹ Hong, "Sahoejuŭijök aegukchuŭi kyoyang," 23.

of films to an absolute minimum and tell their stories, instead, visually. Neither was the medium regarded appropriate for delivering any profound messages – not, at least, by means of dialogue – lest the serious take away from the art form’s inherent comic “appeal” (*hŭngmi*). The same held true for the expression of puppets’ interiority: portraying inner feelings and emotions was viewed as going against the very nature of the medium defined by outward movement rather than the psychologism characteristic of live-action cinema.²⁹⁰

Another common cause of the uncanny was occasional disregard for varying levels of formality and politeness in speech of child characters. A puppet film, *In’gŏri wa nunsaram* (“Ingŏl and the Snowman”), for instance, was widely criticized for being full of “awkward and contrived” (*ŏsaekhago inwijŏgin*) moments (Figure 6.5).



Figure 6.5. A scene from *Ingŏl and the Snowman*

²⁹⁰ Rim, “Inhyŏng yŏnghwa ‘Singihan poksung’a,’” 33.

The two protagonists in this film are a 12-year-old boy and a snowman who is clearly many years his senior (*roin*) based on his voice, appearance, and manner of speaking to the lad. However, when speaking with the snowman, Ingöl employs the same language as if he were speaking to his peer without using polite verb endings and other linguistic markers to distinguish between his social status and that of the snowman. Because of that, critics pointed out, the interaction between the boy and the snowman feels inherently “awkward” (*ösaekhago*) and gives a “discomfiting feeling” (*puranhan kam*).²⁹¹

The uncanny effect was also often produced through a lack of harmonization between sound and image. This was especially true for far more labor-intensive animation productions that required careful coordination between various departments. Failure to harmonize music and other sound effects with image gave rise to an “uncanny mood” (*ösaekhan kibun*). This disparity was often due to the use of heavy orchestral music, as one critic suggested, which was at odds with the fairly light content of children’s films and unappealing to the child’s taste. He argued that using instruments of middle and low register, such as cello or traditional zither, in scoring children’s films only encumbered the child’s undeveloped ability to focus and concentrate.²⁹²

We must bear in mind that what came across as eerie, strange, and uncanny in live-action cinema with real actors got transformed into the grotesque in animation due to the medium’s intrinsic quality to turn everything uncanny into the comic by dint of its very nature as the art form founded on exaggeration and fantasy. While critics disagreed

²⁹¹ Kim, “Adong kyoyuk kwa yŏnghwa,” 34.

²⁹² Kim Chong-ch’öl, “K’ödaran kanŭngsŏng kwa hyöpsohan riyong” [Great possibilities and narrow use], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 9 (1964): 27-29.

over how much exactly the medium should exploit its inherent comicality in the service of educating the young, most conceded that animated films for children had to brim with laughter. The grotesqueness resulting from the lack of experience with the new medium, however, was not seen as serving any pedagogical end. On the contrary, it was viewed negatively as indulging the mischief in the “child-heart” that was supposed to be tamed and transformed into the positive force of personal growth and development. The grotesque, in general, quickly came under fire as unsuitable for the juvenile audience. It was emphasized that, unlike other countries, North Korea was creating animation for children, hence the abject and the comic would, perforce, make very strange bedfellows, given the child spectator’s lack of discernment and good judgment.²⁹³

In sum, all three kinds of animation produced in North Korea during this stage – drawn, puppet, and paper cutout – were steeped in the grotesque due to the lack of skill and experience on part of the first generation of animation artists and often contrary to their intentions. While live-action children’s films turned out to be dead serious and devoid of any humor, making the negative heroes with their character flaws and antics the mainstay of waning viewer interest, animations, by contrast, as one middle schooler from Pyongyang wrote in his letter, were “full of funny moments and breathtaking scenes that make one’s hands sweat.”²⁹⁴ Ironically, the scenes that often engrossed and amused the child spectator the most were a result of a fortuitous encounter between the comic and the abject that the filmmakers failed to avert.

²⁹³ Kim, “Örinidül ege hyöngmyöngjök chuje üi yörökaji yönghwa rül!,” 37-38.

²⁹⁴ Kim Pok-hŭi, “‘Poku üi pul’kil’ i cheil chaemi issössöyo” [The flame of revenge], *Chosŏn yönghwa* 6 (1966): 24.

6.6 Fantasy as the New Normal

The country's cultural engineers championed the comic in children's cinema and animation, because they saw in it the most direct path to the child's psyche. The comic was reckoned a key element of *tongsim*, or the "child-heart," and, therefore, it could help increase the "appeal" (*hŭngmi*) of these films for the audience. Of course, not any variety of the comic was acceptable, as we have witnessed, and, above all, the comic had always to be at the service of and in line with the educational purport of any given film. When it spun out of control, as it often did with animation, giving rise to the unintended grotesque, parody, and farce, the text's educational message also got overturned. The industry ideal was maximum clarity and simplicity, when it came to communicating the "main idea" (*chuje sasang*). However, most films, both live-action and animated, were not always free from doubt, analysts maintained.²⁹⁵

A major conference that brought together leading filmmakers and animators working at the newly founded children's film studio in 1966, a year after its opening, gave much attention to this continuing problem. The participants admitted that there was still a strong tendency for blunt didacticism and moralizing, as well as a persistent lack of conceptual clarity, pointing out a number of recent productions in which the message and the main idea were too vague and unclear even for adults, lest so for young viewers.²⁹⁶ For years, critics had been admonishing budding filmmakers that moral edification should be pursued only through "character portrayal" (*sŏng'kyŏk ŭi sŏljŏng*), taking full

²⁹⁵ Kim, "Tongsim segye ŭi ch'ugu," 37.

²⁹⁶ "Tongsim e matke tŏ chal mandŭlja: Adong yŏnghwa ch'walyŏnso 1965 nyŏndo yesul ch'onghwa hoeŭi chinhaeng" [Let's make films in accordance with the child-heart: proceedings of the general art meeting of the children's film studio for 1965], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 4 (1966): 32.

advantage of the immediacy of the visual medium, rather than through words of caution, lecturing, or advice.²⁹⁷

Apparently, that was easier said than done. Without an interpretive commentary (*haesŏl*), the films were open to multiple readings and misreadings. With it, however, there was always a danger of taking the “appeal” (*hŭngmi*) out of the text in question. When the commentary abounded, as was common with documentary films for children, the audience’s attention became diverted from the image, if the commentary was not consummately aligned with what unfolded onscreen.²⁹⁸ Instead of letting viewers watch the films “with interest” (*hŭngmi ikke*) and independently arrive at the conclusions, some filmmakers chose to take an easier road and convey the story’s moral in the form of direct address in the imperative, telling the audience what to do and what not to do.²⁹⁹ Yet, no one would contest that films that aspired to emulate “moral edification books” (*susin kyo’kwaso*), a genre of literature widespread in North Korea at the time, could never truly win over their audience.³⁰⁰ In short, there was a uniquely cinematic way to moralize, and the filmmakers were yet to discover the secret of implementing it effectively.

In the course of time, the formula that emerged for a successful children’s production emphasized clarity of the main idea, simplicity of the plot, absence of overt moralizing, and appeal of characters and art design. Only then, it was argued, the child spectator would focus all his attention on the screen, assimilating the picture’s subliminal

²⁹⁷ Hong, “Sahoejuũijŏk aegukchuũi kyoyang,” 23.

²⁹⁸ An, “Nyŏllyŏng – simnijŏk t’ũksŏng,” 24.

²⁹⁹ Son Chong-kwŏn, “Manhwa, inhyŏng, chihyŏng yŏnghwa ũi hyŏngsangjŏk t’ũksŏng” [Representational peculiarities of drawn, puppet, and paper cutout animation films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 9 (1966): 33.

³⁰⁰ Kim, “Adong simni wa hyŏngsang supŏp,” 19.

moral lesson without being fully aware of it.³⁰¹ In keeping with this goal, more pressure was being put on screenwriting departments to produce better screenplays, for the latter were viewed as playing a seminal role in ensuring the overall success of the project. The fact that many animations failed to embody the above principles was blamed on the negligence on part of screenwriters who would send an undeveloped screenplay to the production team or fail to provide one, in the first place.³⁰²

The efforts to eradicate the accidental uncanny and grotesque were motivated by the underlying desire to control meaning in children's cinema. But, if in case of live-action films, these measures could probably succeed, that alone was not enough, when it came to animation. As long as the stories continued to be steeped in allegory and metaphor, there was a limit to what these new guidelines could accomplish. In essence, animated films were trying to promote new values and policies using the language, tropes, and techniques of an old form. Motifs of class struggle and patriotic love had to be couched in allegory, and human virtues and vices were to be personified through animals and other non-human characters.³⁰³ Inherent to the fairy tale genre was the tension between the plain meaning of events and characters in the story and their allegorical symbolism. The dilemma that North Korean animators faced, then, was how to move away from traditional forms of storytelling exemplified by the fairy tale without undermining the appeal of their films. The tale form, after all, was a time-tested narrative vehicle for exaggeration and fantasy, the two foundation stones of the medium itself. If

³⁰¹ “Kongsanjuŭi kyoyang kwa yŏnghwa,” 2-4.

³⁰² Kim Kŏl, “Manhwa, inhyŏng ŭi segye” [The world of drawn and puppet animation], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1964): 9-11.

³⁰³ “Tongsim e matke tŏ chal mandŭlja,” 32.

either of them were to be jettisoned, the medium specific charm of animation would suffer, too. With the comic in a straitjacket and the fantastic overboard, animation would be no more than a pale imitation of live-action cinema.

Were the filmmakers to stay true to the medium, they would have to find a way to exercise greater control over the comic and the fantastic. With growing pressure to make more films on contemporary subjects, the fairy tale would eventually have to give way to a new form that would be more suitable for this type of stories. The general consensus gradually decided that science fiction should be this new form. Science fiction films would whet the child's appetite for adventure, validate fantasy and exaggeration, and promote scientific thinking and imagination. In fact, science fiction had been already actively promoted in children's literature since 1956. Between 1956 and 1965, the North Korean children's magazine, *Adong Munhak* ("Children's Literature"), published eighteen science fiction pieces, including original and translated short stories, serialized novels, poems, essays, and plays. The two serialized novels appearing in the magazine, *Sonyŏn uju t'amhŏmdae* ("Youth Space Expedition Team," 1960) and *Pada esŏ sosanan ttang* ("The Land that Rose from the Sea," 1964-65), both include key scenes in which protagonists are provided important clues to solve their respective mysteries by means of films they serendipitously discover during the adventures, as if to suggest an organic relationship between the genre of science fiction and the moving image.³⁰⁴

The growing popularity of science fiction in literature, thus, anticipated its own imminent rise to prominence in cinema in the second half of the 1960s as a cure-all to the problem of the unruly comic. Science fiction not only helped normalize the fantastic,

³⁰⁴ Dafna Zur, "Let's Go to the Moon: Science Fiction in the North Korean Children's Magazine *Adong Munhak*, 1956-1965" in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73:2 (2014): 1-25.

making it appear more plausible, but also allowed to assimilate mischief, placing cinema's toppled positive heroes back on their pedestals. If in the past animators constantly struggled to bring together realism and fantasy, now their union could be consummated more easily and more naturally through science fiction. Critics argued that a tractor floating on a cloud was less convincing than a tractor carried into the skies by a rocket, saving, at the same time, educators the trouble to have to explain to some inquisitive young viewers the science behind such an implausible ascent.³⁰⁵

Apart from normalizing the fantastic, science fiction films also offered a solution to the problem of juvenile mischief. One reason why children are so fascinated with tales, Kim Kŏl argued, is because they love “action and adventure” (*hwal'tong kwa mohŏm*). Mischief, he proposes, is merely one of the forms this interest manifests itself, but it can also be expressed in other ways, such as we see in traditional children's tales. The “spirit of adventurousness” (*mohŏmsim*), Kim Kŏl suggested, can actually be a positive thing, fostering the child's courage, endurance, and imagination.³⁰⁶ By championing adventurousness as the core value of children's cinema, Kim Kŏl was able to give mischievousness identified with *tongsim*, or the “child-heart,” formerly regarded as the inevitable evil of the child's development process, a new face and name.

If in the past filmmakers would simply dismiss this aspect of the child's nature, displacing all “pranks” (*changnan*), “humor” (*iksal*), and “mischief” (*ŏngsŏk*) onto the negative Other, now they could at long last incorporate them all into the positive hero as

³⁰⁵ Son, “Manhwa, inhyŏng, chihyŏng yŏnghwa,” 31-33.

³⁰⁶ Kim, “Tongsim segye ŭi ch'ugu,” 38.

part of the child's natural proclivity for adventure and play.³⁰⁷ Based on the analysis of successes and failures of early productions, a consensus was being reached that, generally speaking, children prefer action and movement to emotion and reflection, a need that the science fiction genre could easily satisfy.³⁰⁸

Along with further efforts to simplify children's films in terms of plot and dialogue, filmmakers sought at the same time to raise their "appeal" (*hŭngmi*) through making them more lively, colorful, and entertaining. As part of this endeavor, the state studio produced its first costume musical film for children in 1963 called *Uri kkottongsan* ("Our flower garden"). The movie follows a very simple plot: a family of deer have been living happily in a flower garden, when their peace is suddenly threatened by the vicious fox and wolf who invade their home on a hill. With the concerted help of other peace-loving creatures of the forest, such as squirrels, chipmunks, bears, raccoons, honeybees, and butterflies, they battle with their enemies and defeat them in the end, driving the aggressors out of the flower garden.³⁰⁹

Clearly, an allegorical retelling of the official story of the war against American imperialists, the film requires little intellectual investment on part of the child spectator. Instead, its main focus is on creating a playful fairy tale world through a succession of musical and dance numbers. Characters dressed in costumes and wearing stylized masks represent an idyllic community of cooperative forest-dwellers who burst into songs and

³⁰⁷ Chŏng, "Kyŏlham myŏt kaji," 11.

³⁰⁸ Ri Chin-hwa, "Adong yŏnghwa ssinario e taehan saenggak" [Thoughts on screenwriting for children's films], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1962): 24.

³⁰⁹ Chu Tong-wŏl, "Chejae wa hyŏngsik: Tonghwa kamyŏn kamugŭk yŏnghwa 'Uri kkot'tongsan' ŭl yŏnch'ul hagosŏ" [Material and form: directing children's mask musical film "Our Flower Garden"], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 6 (1963): 18-19.

dance routines on every occasion, in accordance with the conventions of the film musical genre. Both the fact that it is a musical and that children here play the roles of animals rather than of human characters allows more leeway for the expression of the playful element of *tongsim*. In one scene, for example, three animals “frolic” (*changnan ch'idaga*) on a single-log bridge right under the sign saying that only two are allowed to pass at a time. Scenes, such as this one, although totally inappropriate, were it a film about real children, seem to pose no difficulty here, given that all the protagonists in it are non-human, although performed by child actors.³¹⁰

While not every film was a musical, the movement and dynamism, so integral to the expression of *tongsim*, could also be conveyed cinematographically, if it was not present in the story itself in the form of play or mischief. Filmmakers were advised to make greater use of moving and rotating shots, as well as include as much movement within the shot as possible, especially for static shots. This was not simply because cinema itself was a moving-image medium, but, more importantly, because movement was identified with the “child-heart” itself, a mischievous impulse that would not let a child sit still even for a moment. By extension, films employing too many static shots were considered to make the child spectator “feel bored and constricted” (*ttabunhago taptaphan kam*), and therefore had to be avoided at all costs.³¹¹

In short, the film industry came to realize that the disavowal of mischief would only be counterproductive for the popularity of the new cinema. It was agreed that all children naturally have a mischievous impulse and the filmmakers’ job was to help young patrons master it with their films by channeling this mischief into safe and permissible

³¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

³¹¹ Kim, “Adong simni segye wa yŏnch’ul hyŏngsang,” 30-33.

forms, such as the science fiction or the adventure film, or, in the very least, by compensating for it cinematographically.

6.7 Conclusion

In 1966, the newly established North Korean studio of children's films and animation released its first current events satirical film, *Chegullo torakara* ("Return to your cave"). Made using the paper cutout technique, the film offers a lashing critique of American military intervention in Vietnam. Employing both the comic and the abject, this animated feature relies on contrast and symbolism characteristic of satire in order to wreak ridicule on U.S. imperialist designs for world domination in the best tradition of cartoon and caricature.³¹² After repeated failures to reconcile the comic inherent in the medium of animation with the lofty pedagogical goals of children's cinema, filmmakers finally succeed in fulfilling the official longing for ideological transparency without recourse to allegory. The story is set in the present and features human characters rather than animals to teach its moral lesson, minimizing the need for additional interpretation and contextualization.

The film, however, does not signal the industry's return to the *manhwa*, or cartoon, sensibility, as a whole, but only a limited embrace of the comic too powerful to be resisted or suppressed within the boundaries of a newly delineated genre of "current events satirical film" (*sisa p'ungja yŏnghwa*).³¹³ Just as with the promotion of science

³¹² Hong Su-il, "Yerihan p'ungja ūi p'ilch'i: Chihyŏng yŏnghwa 'Chegullo torakara!' rŭl pogo" [Writing sharp satire: paper cutout film "Return to your cave"], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 8 (1966): 21-22.

³¹³ Ibid., 21.

fiction adventure films aimed at providing a safe outlet for pubescent steam, animated satire was meant to put what had formerly been only unintended grotesque to good educational use. While filmmakers and animators continued to work on increasing the “appeal” of their films by developing the gentle variety of the comic, its powerful “lowly” form survived in anti-American films such as this one. Thus, without completely giving up the comic or the fantastic, the North Korean film world eventually assimilated and normalized them both under the rubric of adventure, science fiction, and anti-American satire, while carrying on with the efforts to improve the overall quality of children’s films and bar any last remnant of the audiovisual uncanny and animated grotesque from the nation’s screens (Figure 6.6).

Although the comic, as everyone admitted, was inseparable from the medium, it could not become the sole defining feature of children’s animation, if these films were to have any educational value at all. Apologists insisted that the “extreme comic” (*kŭktanjögin mangŭk*) characteristic of parody and farce had no place in animation whose mission was to inculcate lofty principles and ideals into the country’s youth. Blaming animators for paying too much attention to the formal elements of the medium, they lamented that in the majority of films the “grotesque” (*kihyŏngjögin chohyŏng*) displaced the “comic” (*manhwajögin köt*), creating an overall “sense of mischievousness” (*changnan hanŭn kam*).³¹⁴

When work on animation first got under way in the late 1950s, some critics proposed to change the name from *manhwa* (“cartoons”) to *kŭrim yŏnghwa* (“drawing films”). Traditionally, drawn animation had been called *manhwa* in Korean, a loan word

³¹⁴ Kim, “Örinidŭl ege hyŏngmyŏngjök chuje ŭi yŏrökaji yŏnghwa rŭl!,” 37-38.

from Chinese that implies the centrality of the technique of exaggeration and suggests shared origins with the art of caricature. However, now that the medium was finally free from the need to resort to “extreme exaggeration” (*chinach'in kwajang*), as demonstrated by the work of Soviet animators who successfully created animated films in a variety of styles, continuing to call it *manhwa* would be a misnomer, the advocates of the name change argued.³¹⁵



Figure 6.6. A scene from an anti-American animated film

However, the more familiar term – *manhwa* – did not disappear. As a result, both names were used interchangeably, adding to the ambiguity regarding the nature and

³¹⁵ Ŭn Ch'ong-chul, “Kŭrim yŏnghwa nŭn ōttŏk'e mandŭrŏjinŭnga” [How are drawn animation films made?], *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* 9 (1959): 26-27.

status of drawn animation in North Korean filmmaking practice. Moreover, as it turned out, novice North Korean animators were yet to master the technique to the extent their Soviet counterparts had before they could forgo their reliance on “extreme exaggeration.” The more familiar term associated with the comic also survived in the official name of the experimental animation group called “Puppet and Cartoon Film Production Group” (*inhyŏng, manhwa yŏnghwa chejaktan*) until it was subsumed by the newly established Children’s Film Studio in 1965.³¹⁶ Numerous articles on animation appearing in *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* throughout the 1960s, likewise, employed both terms synonymously.

Interestingly, the taming of juvenile mischief and the normalization of fantasy have both continued to define North Korean animation until this day. For instance, the two iconic animation series from the late 1980s and 1990s – *Sonyŏn changsu* (“Boy General”) and *Yŏngnihan nŏguri* (“Clever Raccoon”), which adopt the form of a war epic and a science contest, respectively – whet the child spectator’s appetite for action and adventure, as well as for the fantastic and the comic, according to the principles established by the North Korean film world during the “experimental” 1960s.³¹⁷

While many may be familiar with the rise of South Korean animation through its history of co-productions and subcontracting work initially for Japanese and later for U.S. studios since the late 1960s (most notably, for *The Simpsons* in the 1990s and 2000s), few are aware of the fact that North Korean animation has not fallen far behind, in this respect, either. Reports were floated in the mid-2000s that the North Korean animation studio regularly gets subcontracted work for international animation projects, including

³¹⁶ “Adong yŏnghwa ch’walyŏngso ga nawatta,” 34.

³¹⁷ For more on the two animation series, see: Dmitry Mironenko, “The Role of Animation in the System of Ideological Education in North Korea,” A.M. thesis, Harvard University, 2007.

such big titles as Disney's *The Lion King* and *Pocahontas*.³¹⁸ Animation was also the first cultural export Pyongyang started methodically uploading on Youtube since 2006. While North Korea continues to harbor an inferiority complex about its live-action cinema, animation, by contrast, is deemed to have already attained a high enough standard to represent the country's artistic achievements to the outside world.

³¹⁸ Wonhee Lee et al., "North Korea Quietly Emerges as Major Player in Animation Industry," *Radio Free Asia*, December 6, 2006, accessed May 16, 2014, http://www.rfa.org/english/news/nkorea_cartoon-20061206.html.

7. Conclusions

7.1 On Angles, the Devil, and the Laughing Subject

“The first time an angel heard the devil’s laughter, he was dumbfounded. That happened at a feast in a crowded room, where the devil’s laughter, which is terribly contagious, spread from one person to another. The angel clearly understood that such laughter was directed against God and against the dignity of his works. He knew that he must react swiftly somehow, but felt weak and defenseless. Unable to come up with anything of his own, he aped his adversary. Opening his mouth, he emitted broken, spasmodic sounds in the higher reaches of his vocal range (a bit like the sound made on the street of a seaside town by Michelle and Gabrielle), but giving them an opposite meaning: whereas the devil’s laughter denoted the absurdity of things, the angel on the contrary meant to rejoice over how well ordered, wisely conceived, good, and meaningful everything here below was.”³¹⁹

This parable told by Milan Kundera in his well-known novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, encapsulates many of the themes dealt with in this study. Although our drama neither unfolded in the heavenly realms, nor did it feature angels or the devil, it shares a number of important elements with the story above. Kundera’s concept of laughter highlights its separateness and divergence from the divine master plan – something the angel was able to perceive right away. Unlike the angel whose existence is devoted solely to fulfilling God’s will and who, as an agent of God, is able to

³¹⁹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), 86-87.

assume a divine perspective, the devil, by contrast, is far removed from the divine, effectively standing on the other side able to see things as separate from their divine origin and one another rather than interconnected through invisible threads. Essentially, the devil is identified with a divergent point of view on reality, according to which the lack of obvious meaning beyond the surface appearance of things is equated with emptiness and absurdity. The devil sees things as they appear to be rather than as what they truly are. The devil's spasmodic laughter, then, becomes a physical manifestation of this kind of splintered perspective on reality as utterly disconnected and atomized, separate from something much greater, from the all-pervading and all-encompassing level of existence. Each broken sound thus represents a broken shard or a severed limb of Creation, figuratively speaking, dismantled piece-by-piece by the devil's subversively destructive laughter.

While the angel, as an emissary of God, lacks the ability for independent creation, the devil has his tricks that allow him to circumvent this limitation. Therefore, when the latter invents his ruse, all the angel can do to counteract it is invest the very same action with the opposite meaning and intent. The best the angel can do is turn the devil's trick on the perpetrator himself. "Thus the angel and the devil faced each other and, mouths wide open, emitted nearly the same sounds, but each one's noise expressed the absolute opposite of the other's. And seeing the angel laugh, the devil laughed all the more, all the harder, and all the more blatantly, because the laughing angel was infinitely comical." Even so, Kundera submits, the angels have gained something from it, after all. "They

have tricked us with a semantic imposture,” he concludes. “Nowadays we don’t even realize that the same external display serves two absolutely opposed internal attitudes.”³²⁰

An inherent semantic ambivalence of laughter has been a continuing concern for the North Korean state since the early 1950s. As our allegory illustrates, *what* laughter ultimately means depends solely on the laughing subject: whether it will be used for praise or condemnation is a choice we make every moment, a choice which implies agency on part of the subject, even if the choice itself is not always free. We have seen how throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the North Korean state had grappled to understand where the boundary between the two kinds of laughter lies, as it tried time and again through its nationalized film industry to create onscreen laughing subjects that the audiences would identify with.

But the state is no God, despite its aspiration to build a utopian society on earth, to be able to command praiseful mirth from its subjects. When North Korea opened its doors to Western satire, it invited strife and discord, where it needed none. While social and political satire – the devil’s laughter – was instrumental in creating a sense of political cohesion at the cost of brining down the enemy, the same technique became highly problematic when used internally to wage a war against the survivals of outdated ideas and practices. All it did was turn man against man, introducing division and enmity between the scoffers and those they subjected to their scorn.

The search for the methods of semantic reversal and the demarcation of the two laughers’ respective domains within the evolving representational tradition are thus the two distinctive features which characterize the chapter of North Korean history presented in this study. At the same time, the various slippages and failures which happened in the

³²⁰ Ibid., 87.

process, engendering inadvertent laughter, that is, the laughter the state did not intend to produce, enabled the exercise of a different agency by the laughing subject. Throughout this study we have been referring to the laughing subject as the *jester* for his ability to derive pleasure out of chaos, as well as a theoretical gesture toward de Certeau's notion of the everyday as a sphere of tactical trickery and deviance. Each chapter of this dissertation examined a different conundrum faced by the state and the film industry, as they struggled to get their audiences to laugh *with* them instead of laughing *at* them. The progress from written word and still image to spoken word and moving image and, finally, to music and animated image in North Korean media between 1953 and 1969 we have been following here charts not only the state's vicissitudes in coming to grips with the genie of laughter, but also the various agencies this genie had enabled and unleashed in its subjects.

7.2 Laughter's Agencies

We have postulated the jester as a non-complying subject that emerged largely through the state's ill-conceived efforts to lend him existence through representation. Chapter 1 described the genesis of the North Korean jester, first, as an object of official representation in satirical cartoons and, later, as an object of self-representation in *pyŏkpo*, or workplace and community "wall gazettes." The interpellation of the jester was further made possible by what I have referred to as the "culture of fragmentation." Demolished quite literally in the course the Korean War, the country reemerged as a patchwork of old and new pieces, scrambling to regain its wholesomeness, while it

continued its push for socialist transformation. Fragmentation thus did not simply denote the nearly universal breakdown and disrepair of the physical space and the infrastructure of leisure, but also implied the fragmented and decontextualized quality of cultural production, in general, best exemplified by the situation with poorly translated foreign literature, which flooded the country during the 1950s.

In particular, the social satire directed against lingering pre-socialist practices and beliefs in the contemporary society featured in *Hwa(l)sal* (“Arrow”) and other popular publications at the time helped not only create self-awareness among petty street hooligans and delinquents of their subjecthood, but also stimulated their self-identification as producers of comedy and as jesters in the public eye. Just as the devil’s “spasmodic laughter” would shatter the world into millions of broken pieces, so would the cartoons depicting the everyday life fragment the lived reality into a motley of comic effects. Visual representations of the trivial and the mundane achieved through these elements’ severing from the whole by means of such techniques as fragmentation, decontextualization, and exaggeration hardly served their intended purpose, that is, correcting unwanted character flaws in the objects of such portrayals. Instead, they seem to have only brought about the opposite result – a self-conscious and deliberate *role-play* by the selfsame delinquents now cast as popular clowns. Let us mark this as the first agency engendered by the culture of fragmentation.

Largely focusing on the quintessential glitch of the “cinema of fits and starts” and its repercussions for audience reception, chapter 2 explained how the mechanically fractured exhibition process could in an instant transform any text into an unexpected parody, turning the spectator into a willful accomplice in the ephemeral act of subverting

official meaning for the sake of enjoyment. As Henri Bergson has suggested, *automatism*, which was also at the heart of unending malfunctions of the “cinema of fits and starts,” is one of the sources of the comic, often exploited in such genres as slapstick comedy.³²¹ The invasion of inorganic rigidity characteristic of mechanical phenomena into organic life, according to Bergson, inevitably produces reflexive laughter – the type of laughter derided in North Korean official discourse as bourgeois, for its purpose is to distract the masses from serious social, political, and economic problems facing society and make them forget about their own inferior position as an exploited class.

While this chapter analytically overlaps with the previous one in positing a “chameleon spectator,” that is, a laughing subject engaged in a particular type of tactical role-play and pretense, although in a somewhat different context and operative under a dissimilar set of conditions, it also suggests a distinct agency enabled by the automatism at the core of the beleaguered “cinema of fits and starts.” As the cinematic apparatus disintegrated into its mechanical components, creating all sorts of ruptures and distortions along the way, some would take the matter into their own hands, literally assembling their own film projectors and even making their own films. These homegrown tinkerers represented a different kind of agency in their own right – that of *creative inventiveness*. No longer relying on the defaulting state for technical or economic assistance, the resourceful Franklins and Edisons put themselves in control of both technological innovation, as well as content production, thereby undermining the state’s monopoly on public entertainment.

³²¹ For a more detailed discussion, see: Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1911).

Chapter 3 dealt with the history around North Korea's first attempt at creating a comedy film. Later consigned to the dustbin of history, this 1958 production by a forgotten filmmaker educated in Japan and the Soviet Union, Yun Chae-yŏng, brings to the fore the dilemma of satirical representation, in general, and satire in live-action cinema, in particular. A newcomer to comedy, Yun tried to please both camps with a film that combined biting satire with gentle humor and, alas, with no success. The product turned out more offensive both to critics and the public at large than anyone had anticipated. The first failed experiment at creating a comedy film forced a revision of the effectiveness of the earlier policy promoting satire against social "backwardness." Unlike satirical cartoons, the photorealism of the moving image posed the difficulty of immediacy and specificity: no longer was the public looking at largely symbolic archetypes drawn according to artistic conventions, but viewing, instead, real flesh-and-blood actors flaunt their (the audience's) own character flaws in their face.

Compounded by fatal strategic miscalculations regarding which characters should be portrayed through satire and which through humor, Yun's *Uri sawi, uri myŏnŭri* ("Our son-in-law, our daughter-in-law") raised the question of compatibility of the two types of the comic. Revealing more than it hid about contemporary North Korean political reality, with anti-Soviet purges at home and student defections abroad, the film unwittingly exposed more about the uneasy situation than the director had the license to show. With the comedy denounced and the director banned shortly after the film's national premiere, the *authorial agency* to negotiate meaning was further curtailed, reducing the film director to a nominal figure, as far as creative freedom was concerned. Although this agency was so short-lived that we could not even hypothesize about it until the author's

discovery of the “lost” film in Russian archives, it has important implications for our understanding of North Korean cinema and the place of the director in it.

In chapter 4, I examined the circumstances that led to the emergence of one of North Korea’s representative film genres of *kyŏng hŭigŭk* (“light comedy”) in the 1960s, which was now devoid of any trace of satire. Largely modeled on early Hollywood slapstick and musical comedies, *kyŏng hŭigŭk* films placed musicality in the center of contemporary debates about the comic in cinema. At the heart of these debates were the questions of film music, rhythm, and montage. The film revolution of the 1960s thus helped arrive at an important theoretical discovery that takes us back to the opening parable of this chapter.

The outcome of these heated debates was that the broken, spasmodic laughter of satire became ultimately supplanted by the pleasing, mellifluous laughter of humor. For in order for the angel’s semantic imposture to work, it is not enough to merely change the intent – some change in form would have to follow, as well. As Kundera admits, the laughing angel was, after all, infinitely comical, while trying to imitate the movements of the devil. “Laughable laughter is disastrous,” he writes.³²² As the North Korean case suggests, converting the chaos of cacophony associated with the devil’s condemning laughter into the harmony of polyphony associated with the angel’s rejoicing laughter would just do the trick.

Although the critical and popular success of the new genre, as evidenced by the 1966 production of a light-comedy film, *Myŏngnanghan mudae* (“Merry Ring,” dir. Kim Yŏng), seems to suggest that the industry finally succeeded in creating effective comical characters that our offscreen jesters could identify with without recourse to satirical

³²² Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 87.

methods, the victory, in truth, was incomplete at best. As the country's only film journal, *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* ("Korean Film") spoke to filmmakers and audiences at the same time, promoting both technical knowledge and critical understanding in order to educate the professional and deepen film appreciation of the moviegoer. The "critical cinephilia," which grew out of it, granted the supposedly reformed jester in the audience a much better grasp of film as an art form, enabling him to exercise the agency of *informed judgment*.

Chapter 5 of this dissertation chronicled the final demarcation between humor and satire in North Korean media culture. Focusing on the development of children's cinema and animation during the 1960s, it relates the difficulties in creating films that would appeal to the child's taste. Concerned that children would be further encouraged in their mischief and pranks, filmmakers initially tried to divorce the positive characters of early films from mischief altogether, making the negative heroes, instead, the little daredevils who ultimately pay the price for their social deviance. The strategy, however, quickly proved a failure, as child-spectators turned out to find the latter more attractive, funny, and identifiable, imitating them in their games, once they left the cinema, instead of following the positive role models.

If the unrealistic positive heroes of these early productions created an uncanny effect, alienating their target audiences, the first animations, on the other hand, trafficked in the inadvertent grotesque. Both live-action films and animations, although in different ways, sowed doubt and disbelief among young children and adolescents – a problem taken rather seriously in contemporary discussions we find on the pages of *Chosŏn yŏnghwa*. Refusal to conform to positive role models that resembled automatons rather

than real children and to give up mischief suggests, I would argue, a latent agency of *disobedience*. In fact, the push against those tendencies was so strong that the industry had no other choice but to find a way to accommodate the audience's wishes through developing specific genres that would make room for juvenile mischief.

7.3 Toward Comic Disobedience

I opened my inquiry with an observation regarding the extent of chameleonizing in contemporary North Korean society. To a short-term visitor from the West chaperoned along predetermined itineraries, North Koreans may, indeed, appear as disciplined and loyal supporters of the regime. Although this perception began recently to erode owing to defector testimonies about the growing underground culture of nonconformism, by and large this phenomenon has been attributed in scholarship and media to the post-Cold War shifts in international relations, leading to the breakdown of global political and economic systems that until the early 1990s had ensured the prosperity of the North Korean state.

No one has, however, until now wondered whether this nonconformism might have a longer history. Our historical foray into the 1950s and 1960s, an area of research on North Korea that still remains wanting in many respects, has uncovered a very different picture of reality than we had formerly assumed. Through our carefully chosen examples we have seen how the culture of nonconformism previously identified with the 1990s, in fact, had come into existence much earlier during the first decades of North Korea's nationhood. Focusing in our method on the questions of *how* events unfolded,

how policies were implemented, and *how* people actually responded to them, we were able to discover that there is more to North Korean nonconformism than just the ability to chameleonize.

Our journey through the North Korean streets, movie theaters, and film studios has added a plethora of rich empirical detail to what the French philosopher Michel de Certeau had described as the “network of antidiscipline.” Starting with Pyongyang’s mercurial flirtation with satire in the 1950s, this network emerged over time as a product of various ruses, tactics, and ploys developed by the ordinary individual in response to the state’s intrusive efforts to discipline his leisure and, of all things, his laughter. We have consciously referred to the ordinary person as a *jester* due to his impulse that drove him to constantly look for ways to outmaneuver, outwit, and, ultimately, outlaugh the encroaching state.

Unlike other existing studies of the everyday in North Korea, this project has taken great pains to show that the sphere of everyday life is not only a sphere of hegemonic repression and dreary uneventfulness, but is also a sphere of inherent inventiveness, as suggested by de Certeau’s work. Moreover, as clearly demonstrated by our investigation of satire, humor, and laughter in North Korea, the adaptive manipulation of these mechanisms of quotidian domination and repression is inseparably bound up with the question of pleasure and enjoyment.

The taxonomy of agencies we have developed as a result of our scrutiny spans a variety of tactical responses of the weak to the strong that goes beyond chameleonism and includes such distinct forms as *pretense*, *inventiveness*, *authorship*, *informed judgment*, and, ultimately, *disbelief* and *disobedience*, all attesting to the myriad ways in

which the ordinary individual could exercise his autonomy. Weaving together parallel histories of leisure, laughter, and spectatorship, we have attempted to find specific loci of everyday nonconformism, which we were able to situate in the individual's body, voice, and organs of perception (ear and eye). Mirroring a progression from a more revealed to a less manifest presence, this nonconformism had followed a certain trajectory from outward street pranks to much less visible audience alienation over the span of nearly two decades.

In a way, one could make an argument that the state's efforts to discipline its wayward jesters had succeeded. However, we have evidence to the contrary, showing that both the street and the movie theater survived as the spaces of autonomy throughout the following decades. Even in the 1970s, as Barbara Demick writes, movie audiences in North Korea tended to be rough and rowdy, inevitably turning a cultural experience of moviegoing into an opportunity for a small social upheaval.³²³ That still has not changed in the early 21st century, according to the accounts of those who recently visited the biannual international film festival in Pyongyang.³²⁴

It is, perhaps, then not that the state actually succeeded in eradicating the culture of antidisipline, turning rambunctious jesters into compliant followers, but rather drove them underground and out of public sight. However, when the political circumstances began to change in the early 1990s, the jester also started to reemerge from his temporary hideout. Kang Chol-hwan, who escaped North Korea in the 1990s, writes, "Since the sale of radio receivers wasn't as closely monitored as might be expected, I was able to get away with registering one and paying hush money on the second. Listening to South

³²³ Demick, *Nothing to Envy*, 16.

³²⁴ Coen de Keuster, interview with the author, March 18, 2012.

Korean radio had to be done with extreme caution. The poor soundproofing of most North Korean dwellings could easily give us away.” He adds that while in the early 1990s few North Koreans dared tune in to radio transmissions from the South, many more do so these days.³²⁵

The 1950s represent a crucial moment in North Korean history not only because Pyongyang initiated a process of distancing from Moscow over liberalization reforms identified with Nikita Khrushchev’s “thaw,” but also due to the fact that North Korea began to diverge from the Soviet Union in its attitude toward laughter. Whereas the more open political climate in the USSR fostered a widespread culture of jesting, perhaps, best exemplified by the birth of one of the all-time favorite shows on Soviet, and later Russian, television known as KVN (an abbreviation in Russian for the “Club of the Funny and Inventive”) in the fall of 1961, the increasingly controlling North Korean state, conversely, sought to regulate public laughter in content and in form.³²⁶ And even though the show was eventually shut down in 1972 by the government and did not air again until 1986 following the liberal reforms of Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, it had had enough time to work the irreparable “damage” to the Soviet system.

One could argue that, for better or for worse, the demise of the Soviet empire was, ultimately, the result of the government’s failure to restrain the laughter the state itself had promoted in the mid-1950s. In a striking parallel to the North Korean case, banning the popular humorous TV show, the whole premise of which was that it was unscripted and broadcasted live, only led to the development of a ubiquitous underground culture of

³²⁵ Kang and Rigoulot, *Aquariums of Pyongyang*, 185.

³²⁶ For an overview of KVN’s history, see the show’s official site: www.amik.ru.

resistance in the Soviet Union. A sociocultural anthropologist Alexei Yurchak identifies this late socialist development by the original Russian term *stiob* (slang for “banter”):

Stiob was a peculiar form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor. It required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two. The practitioners of *stiob* themselves refused to draw a line between these sentiments, producing an incredible combination of seriousness and irony, with no suggestive signs of whether it should be interpreted as the former or the latter, refusing the very dichotomy between the two.³²⁷

Yurchak points out that *stiob* cannot be understood simply as a form of resistance to authoritative symbols, since it also involves a feeling of affinity toward them, and in that sense is similar to Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalesque parody. However, unlike the latter, Soviet *stiob* was not limited to temporally and spatially bounded and publicly sanctioned “carnivals.” Rather, it functioned, Yurchak suggests, in a much broader array of contexts as an “everyday aesthetic of living.”³²⁸ He further explains that *stiob* did not simply ridicule authoritative discourse, but rather imitated its performative shift, associating authoritative forms with unanticipated meanings.³²⁹

Perhaps, the North Korean jester could be best understood along the same lines. After all, as Yurchak notes, by the early 1980s, *stiob* became an almost universal phenomenon not only in the Soviet Union, but also in other socialist

³²⁷ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 249-250.

³²⁸ Ibid., 250.

³²⁹ Ibid., 264.

countries of Eastern Europe.³³⁰ While North Korea, as we know, began to diverge from the rest of the socialist bloc as early as the late 1950s, it did go through the same formative period marked by the dominance of political and social satire. If the relative freedom of the Soviet Union and other East European nations served as a perfect breeding ground for something like *stio*b, in North Korea, given its more repressive political climate, something similar could have only existed in a much more muted form.

Ironically, while living in North Korea as an exchange student, I developed a nightly ritual of gathering in front of a TV with my Russian friends to watch a new episode of *The Simpsons*. Of course, the iconic American animated sitcom was not shown on North Korean state television – we could only watch it through the embassy’s satellite that broadcasted major Russian TV channels and only on the embassy premises and nowhere else. And yet, the stark contrast between the unabashed American satire of *The Simpsons* within and the seemingly somber reality just outside our compound walls made me wonder what kind of other nonconformist secrets might be lurking behind other people’s closed doors.

Whether nonconformism is practiced openly or in secret, its power cannot be overestimated. The subtle nonconformism of the North Korean jester, which, as we discovered, goes back to the 1950s, rarely veers too far from established social norms. But, even in those small steps off the official path into the realm of unsanctioned moments of irony, parody, sarcasm, and humor, the ordinary North Korean has managed to persevere against all odds. George Orwell once famously

³³⁰ Ibid., 253.

wrote that every joke resembles a tiny revolution.³³¹ If that is so, then North Korean jesters may be fomenting a new revolution in their everyday acts of comic disobedience.

³³¹ See: Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, ed. *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968).

Appendix: Film Index (1949-1966) ³³²

No.	Title	Year	Screenplay	Director	Cinematography
1	<i>Nae kohyang</i> [My hometown]	1949	Kim Sŭng-gu	Kang Hong-sik	Ko Hyŏng-gyu
2	<i>Yong'gwangno</i> [Blast furnace]	1950	Kim Yŏng-gŭn	Mŭn Chŏng-sik	Ch'oe Sun-hong
3	<i>Ch'oso rŭl chik'inŭn saramdŭl</i> [Sentry men]	1950	Kang Hong-sik		Ko Hyŏng-gyu
4	<i>Sonyŏn ppaltchisan</i> [Young partisans]	1951	Yun Tu-hŏn	Yun Ryong-gyu	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
5	<i>Tto tasi chŏnsŏn ũro</i> [Again to the front]	1952	Han Wŏn-nae, Kang Ho	Ch'ŏn Sang-in	Chŏng Kyu-wan
6	<i>Hyangt'o rŭl chik'inŭn saramdŭl</i> [People who guard the homeland]	1952	Yun Tu-hŏn	Yun Ryong-gyu	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
7	<i>Pihaeng'gi sanyang kunjo</i> [[Plane shootdown officer]]	1953	Han Sang-un	Kang Hong-sik	Ko Hyŏng-gyu
8	<i>Chŏngch'albyŏng</i> [A scout]	1953	Han Sang-un	Chŏn Tong-min	O Ung-t'ak*
9	<i>Ppaltchisan ch'ŏnyŏ</i> [A partisan girl]	1954	Kim Sŭng-gu	Yun Ryong-gyu	O Ung-t'ak*
10	<i>Arŭm taŭn norae</i> [Beautiful song]	1955	Chu Tong-min**	Chŏn Tong-min	Han Ch'ang-hae
11	<i>Sinhon pubu</i> [Newlyweds]	1955	Chu Tong-min	Yun Ryong-gyu*	O Ung-t'ak*
12	<i>Tasi kŭrok'e sal su ŏpta</i> [Can't live like this anymore]	1956	Ri Chong-sun	Ch'ŏn Sang-in	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
13	<i>Choguk ũi adŭl</i> [The son of fatherland]	1956	Ch'u Min	Mŭn Chŏng-sik	Chŏng Kyu-wan
14	<i>Pada nŭn purŭnda</i> [The sea is calling]	1956	Han Sang-un	Yun Chae-yŏng*	O Ung-t'ak*
15	<i>Sŭngnyangi</i> [Jackals]	1956	Sŏ Man-il	Ri Sŏk-chin	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
16	<i>Sidosŏng ũi iyagi</i> [Story of Sido Castle]	1956	Chŏng Chun-ch'ae	Chŏng Chun-ch'ae	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
17	<i>Paektusani poinda</i> [Mt. Paektu on the horizon]	1956	Yun Tu-hŏn	Kim Rak-sŏp	Chŏng Kyu-wan
18	<i>Haengbok ũi kil</i> [The road to happiness]	1956	Chu Tong-min	Chŏn Tong-min	O Ung-t'ak*
19	<i>Ŏrangch'ŏn</i> [The Ŏrang creek]	1957	Han Sŏng	Yun Ryong-gyu	Han Ch'ang-hae
20	<i>Itchi malla P'aju rŭl!</i> [Do not forget P'aju!]	1957	Collective screenwriting	Ri Sŏk-chin* Ch'oe Nam-sŏn**	O Ung-t'ak*

³³² This film index is based on two official lists of North Korean feature films published in *Chosŏn yŏnghwa* journal in 1958 and 1966, respectively. Information about films and filmmakers appearing in the 1958 index, but missing in the 1966 index is marked with one asterisk (*). New information about films and filmmakers added to the 1966 index and not originally appearing in the 1958 index is marked with a double asterisk (**). Entire entries missing in the 1966 index, but appearing in the 1958 index are shaded.

Appendix: Film Index (1949-1966) (continued)

No.	Title	Year	Screenplay	Director	Cinematography
21	<i>Ch'ongch'un</i> [Youth]	1957	Pak T'ae-hong	Ri Sök-chin Yun Chae-yöng*	O Ung-t'ak*
22	<i>Chindallae</i> [Azaleas]	1957	Chönn Tong-min O Un-sönn	Sin T'ae-uk Son Mu-p'yo	Pak Kyöng-wönn
23	<i>Öttök'e ttöröjyö sal su issürya</i> [How can we live apart?]	1957	Han Sang-un Yang Chae-ch'ung**	O Pyöng-ch'o	Chöng Kyu-wan
24	<i>Sanmae</i> [Mountain hawk]	1957	Han Sang-un** Chu Tong-min	Chöng Chun-ch'ae*	Pak Pyöng-su
25	<i>Kkünnaji anün chönt'u</i> [Unending battle]	1957	Ri Chi-yong	Min Chöng-sik	Han Ch'ang-hae
26	<i>Simch'öngjön</i> [Story of Simch'öng]	1957	Kim A-bu* Kim Rak-söp**	Kim Rak-söp	Pak Pyöng-su
27	<i>Hyöngje</i> [Brothers]	1957	Kim Süng-gu	Ch'önn Sang-in Yun Ryong-gyu	Ko Hyöng-gyu
28	<i>Suribong</i> [Suri peak]	1958	Sin Tong-ch'önn	Chu Yöng-söp Pak Pyöng-gwal	Chöng Kyu-wan
29	<i>Wihömhän sungan</i> [A dangerous moment]	1958	Han Sang-un Ch'u Min*	Son Mu-p'yo Pak Pyöng-gwal*	Paek Rin-gi Chöng Kyu-wan
30	<i>Uri sawi, uri myönnüri</i> [Our son-in-law, our daughter-in-law]	1958	Chi Chae-ryong Ri Tük-hong Hong Könn*	Yun Chae-yöng* Ch'oe Nam-sönn	Han Ch'ang-hae Paek Ün-yöng
31	<i>Kkoma sönjang</i> [Little captain]	1958	Pak Üng-ho Chi Chae-ryong	Ri Ki-söng	Han Ch'ang-hae
32	<i>Kil ün hanaida</i> [The road is one]	1958	Ch'u Min O Pyöng-ch'o	O Pyöng-ch'o	Pak Kyöng-wönn
33	<i>Ömöni üi p'um</i> [In mother's arms]	1958	Chönn Tong-min Kang Hyo-sun	Chönn Tong-min Sin T'ae-uk	Ko Hyöng-gyu
34	<i>Tallyöra Sönyönho</i> [School train]	1958	Pak T'ae-hong	Chu Yöng-söp	Ko Hyöng-gyu
35	<i>Chönu</i> [Comrade-in-arms]	1958	Ri Chi-yong	Min Chöng-sik	Pak Pyöng-su
36	<i>Küga kanün kil</i> [His road]	1958	Han Sang-un	Ch'önn Sang-in	Chöng Kyu-wan
37	<i>Maül üi könsölja</i> [Builders of the village]	1959	Kim Myöng-nam		Ha Kyöng
38	<i>Ku üi sowön</i> [His wish]	1959	Chu Tong-min	O Pyöng-ch'o	Han Ch'ang-hae
39	<i>Aegukcha</i> [Patriot]	1959	Song Yöng Chu Tong-min	Chönn Tong-min	Pak Pyöng-su
40	<i>Millima iyagihara</i> [Let the forest speak]	1959	Song Yöng	Ri Mun-söp	Chöng Kyu-wan Song In-ho

Appendix: Film Index (1949-1966) (continued)

No.	Title	Year	Screenplay	Director	Cinematography
41	<i>Pukto ch'ilsŏn poigŏnman</i> [The Big Dipper far away]	1959	Ryu Ki-hong Han Sang-un	Min Chŏng-sik Ryu Ho-son	Ko Hyŏng-gyu
42	<i>Chong'gak kusi</i> [At 9 sharp]	1959	Pak T'ae-hong	Ch'oe Nam-sŏn	Chŏng Kyu-wan
43	<i>Kwangmyŏng ŭl ch'ajasŏ</i> [Into the bright future]	1959	Han Sang-un	Han Hŭi-ch'ŏl	Paek Rin-gi
44	<i>Ch'unhyangjŏn</i> [The story of Ch'unhyang]	1959	Kim Sŭng-gu	Yun Ryong-gyu	
45	<i>Chullyŏng ŭl nŏmŏsŏ</i> [Over the peak]	1959	Ri Chong-sun	Ch'oe Nam-sŏn Son Mu-p'yo	Han Ch'ang-hae
46	<i>Mirae rŭl sarang hara</i> [Love the future!]	1959	Pak Sŭng-su	Ch'oe Nam-sŏn Ch'ŏn Sang-in	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
47	<i>Kijŏgi ullinda</i> [The whistle blow]	1959	Pak Ch'un- t'aek	Ri Ki-sŏng	Ko Hyŏng-gyu
48	<i>Ppalgang ttaeng'gi</i> [Red ribbon]	1959	Pyŏn Hŭi-gŭn Sin T'ae-uk	Sin T'ae-uk	Pak Pyŏng-su
49	<i>Haengbokhan kŏri</i> [A happy street]	1959	Pak Yŏng-hŭi Kim Chae-ho	Kim Ki-ho Kang Hong-sik	Ha Kyŏng
50	<i>Chinsilhan saramdŭl</i> [Men of integrity]	1959	Han Sŏng	O Pyŏng-ch'o	Paek Rin-gi
51	<i>Aejŏng</i> [Love]	1959	Pak T'ae-hong	Kang Hong-sik Son Mu-p'yo	Han Ch'ang-hae Ha Kyŏng
52	<i>Pulgŭn nekt'ai</i> [Red scarf]	1959		Chu Yŏng-sŏp	Ko Hyŏng-gyu
53	<i>Saeroun nanal</i> [New times]	1959	Han Sang-un	Sin T'ae-uk Ri Ki-sŏng	Pak Pyŏng-su
54	<i>Ttang (Ipu Ipu'yŏn, 2p'yŏn)</i> [Earth (part 1, episode 1,2)]	1959	Ri Tŭk-hong	Chŏn Tong-min	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
55	<i>Kŭmsangang ch'ŏnyŏ</i> [The maids of Kŭmsan river]	1959		Chu Yŏng-sŏp	Chŏng Kyu-wan
56	<i>Tangyŏl ŭi norae (Ipu)</i> [A song of solidarity (part 1)]	1959	Ri Puk-myŏng	Yun Ryong-gyu	Chŏng Kyu-wan
57	<i>Uri konjang sŏnsudŭl</i> [Our factory's athletes]	1959	Kim Myŏng- nam		Chŏng Kyu-wan Ha Kyŏng
58	<i>Pŏttŭriyŏ, uri wa hamkke kaja</i> [Come with us, pals]	1960	Ri Chong-sun	Ch'ŏn Sang-in	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
59	<i>Pulgŭn sinhot'an</i> [Red flare]	1960	Chang Pyŏng- gi	Kang Hong-sik	Song In-ho
60	<i>Pulsajo</i> [Phoenix]	1960	Han Sang-un	Han Hŭi-ch'ŏl	Chŏng Kyu-wan
61	<i>Nyŏsŏng yŏngung kwangbu</i> [Miner heroines]	1960	Chu Tong-min	Yun Ryong-gyu	
62	<i>Sujŏnggol saramdŭl</i> [People of Sujŏng valley]	1960	Sin Ko-song	Sin T'ae-uk	Paek Ũn-yŏng
63	<i>Hwanghae ŭi norae</i> [Song of the Yellow Sea]	1960	Pak P'al-yang		Paek Rin-gi
64	<i>Tongi t'unda</i> [Daybreak]	1960		Chŏn Tong-min	Ha Kyŏng

Appendix: Film Index (1949-1966) (continued)

No.	Title	Year	Screenplay	Director	Cinematography
65	<i>Pulgŭn kkot pongori</i> [A red flower bud]	1960	Pak Ŭn-ho	Ch'oe Nam-sŏn	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
66	<i>Hangjaeng ŭi sŏgŭk</i> [An overture of resistance]	1960	Chu Tong-min	Kang Hong-sik	Chŏng Kyu-wan
67	<i>Han punyŏ hoewŏn ŭi iyagi</i> [A story of one female member]	1960	Ri Tŭk-hong	Son Mu-p'yo	Pak Pyŏng-su Kim Ryŏn-hak
68	<i>Tumangang</i> [Tuman river]	1960	Ri Chong-sun	Ch'ŏn Sang-in	Pak Pyŏng-su
69	<i>Taedong'gang pan esŏ</i> [On the banks of the Taedong river]	1960		Ri Ki-sŏng	Paek Rin-gi
70	<i>Kalmaegiho ch'ŏngnyŏndŭl</i> [Youth of the Seagull boat]	1961	Han Sang-un	Han Sŏng-sun	
71	<i>Haeparagi</i> [Sunflower]	1961	Pak Ryŏng-bo	Ch'oe Nam-sŏn	Kim Ryŏn-hak
72	<i>Yonghaegongdŭl</i> [Blast furnace workers]	1961	Han Sang-un	Sin T'ae-uk	Pak Pyŏng-su
73	<i>Kongjang ūn na ŭi taehak</i> [Factory is my university]	1961		Son Mu-p'yo	Chŏng Kyu-wan
74	<i>Kkot p'inŭn sijŏl</i> [The time when flowers bloom]	1961	Pyŏn Hŭi-gŭn	Ch'ŏn Sang-in	Chŏng Kyu-wan
75	<i>Pulgŭn simjŏng</i> [Red heart]	1961	Ch'oe Ik-kyu Kim Hŭi-bong Ha Kyŏng	Ch'oe Ik-kyu	Ri Hŭi-sŏng
76	<i>Pun'gyesŏn maul esŏ</i> [In the DMZ village]	1961	Ri Chi-yong	Pak Hak	
77	<i>Chŏngnyŏn chagŏp panjang</i> [Young leader of a brigade]	1962	Han Myŏng-ch'ŏn	Kang Hong-sik Pak Tong-yŏn	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
78	<i>Wŏnssu rŭl itchi malla</i> [Don't forget the enemy!]	1962	Chŏng Tong-hyŏn	Collective directing	Pak Pyŏng-su Hong Wŏn-il
79	<i>Kang kŏnnŏ maul esŏ sae norae tŭllyŏnda</i> [A new song is heard from the village across the river]	1962	Sin Ko-song		Ha Kyŏng
80	<i>Saemul</i> [New products]	1962	Paek In-jun Ri Tŭk-hong Kim Tŏk-un	Min Chŏng-sik Im Ch'ung-ho	Paek Rin-gi
81	<i>Tonhwa ŭi surim sok esŏ</i> [In the forest of Tonhwa]	1962	Kim Sŭng-gu	Son Mu-p'yo	Ri Hŭi-sŏng
82	<i>I kŏsŭn chŏnsŏri anida</i> [This is not a legend]	1962	Pak Kŭn Wi Chang-hyŏk	O Pyŏng-ch'o	Chŏng Kyu-wan
83	<i>Pulgŭn sŏndongwŏn</i> [Red agitator]	1962	Cho Paek-ryŏng	Pak Hak	Pak Pyŏng-su
84	<i>Sanullim</i> [Rumblings of a mountain]	1962	Ri Tong-ch'un	Kim Yŏng Ch'oe Un-bong	Hwang Kwang-hyŏn Song Kwang-il
85	<i>Uri kkot tongsan</i> [Our flower garden]	1963	Ra Chung-hong	Chu Tong-wŏl	Kim Ul-san
86	<i>Kyoye mudae</i> [Circus ring]	1963		Han Hŭi-ch'ŏl	Paek Rin-gi

Appendix: Film Index (1949-1966) (continued)

No.	Title	Year	Screenplay	Director	Cinematography
87	<i>Kkoma kisangdae</i> [Little meteorologist]	1963	Kim Ryong-sŏ	Kim Yŏng	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
88	<i>Kkŏjiji anŭn tŭng'pul</i> [The lamp that always shines]	1963	Kim Sŭng-gu	Ch'oe Nam-sŏn An Mun-ha	Ryŏng Puk-yŏng
89	<i>Paegilhong</i> [Crape myrtle]	1963	Kwŏng Chŏng-ung	Ch'oe Ik-kyu	Pak Pyŏng-su
90	<i>Pulgŭn kkot</i> [Red flower]	1963	Ri Chong-sun	Ch'ŏn Sang-in	Hong Wŏn-il
91	<i>Tasi ch'ajŭn irŭm</i> [A recovered name]	1963	Ra Chung-hong	Chŏn Un-bong	Chŏng Bong-ch'u
92	<i>Tiang ŭl chik'nŭn saramdŭl</i> [People who guard the land]	1963	Han Pok-kyu	Chŏn Tong-min	Kim Ryŏn-hak
93	<i>Tŭkkŏn simjŏng</i> [A warm heart]	1963	Kim Sŭng-gu	Min Chŏng-sik	Hong Wŏn-il
94	<i>Choguk ŭro toraoda</i> [Return to the fatherland]	1963	O Pyŏng-ch'o	O Pyŏng-ch'o	Ri Hŭi-sŏng
95	<i>Sae sedae</i> [The new generation]	1963	Ch'oe Ik-kyu	Ch'oe Ik-kyu	Chu Yŏng-saeng
96	<i>Nyŏngwŏn</i> [Eternity]	1963	Han Ik-su	Ch'oe Nam-sŏn	Chŏng Bong-ch'u Hong Wŏn-il
97	<i>Ch'ukpae</i> [A toast]	1963	Ri Chong-sun	Ch'ŏn Sang-in	Chŏng Kyu-wan
98	<i>Chŏngbang'gong</i> [The spinner]	1963	Han Sŏng	O Pyŏng-ch'o	Kim Ryŏn-hak
99	<i>Taeji ŭi adŭl (1,2pu)</i> [Son of the earth (part 1,2)]	1963	Chu Tong-in	Sin T'ae-uk	Pak Pyŏng-su
100	<i>Ch'ŏnyŏ sŏnjang</i> [A girl captain]	1963	Kim Se-ryun	Han Sŏng-sun	Song Kwang-il
101	<i>Tu chibaein</i> [Two managers]	1963	Song Yŏng	Ch'oe Pyŏng-gyun	Ryŏm Pok-yŏng
102	<i>Chŏyemangsŏn 558ho</i> [Trawler no. 558]	1963		Cho Sik	Kim Ul-san Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
103	<i>Hongbujŏn</i> [Story of Hongbu]	1963	Song Yŏng	Kim Sŏng-gyo	Paek Rin-gi
104	<i>Kongch'ŏngwŏn ŭi norae</i> [A pioneer's song]	1964	Pak Sŭng-su	Son Mu-p'yo An Mun-ha Chu Tong-wŏl	Pak Pyŏng-su
105	<i>108 ŭi pimil</i> [The secret of 108]	1964	Ri Tong-ch'un	Ch'oe Nam-sŏn	Chŏng Kyu-wan
106	<i>Palgŭn t'aeyang arae</i> [Under the bright sun]	1964	Cho Ryŏng-ch'ul	Min Chŏng-sik	Hong Wŏn-il
107	<i>Yŏngi nŭn noraehanda</i> [Song of Yŏngi]	1964	Im Hyŏn-jae	Han Hŭi-ch'ŏl Ri Tŏk-kyu	Ri Hŭi-sŏng
108	<i>Ch'imnyaksŏn Shyamanho</i> [USS Sherman]	1964	Ri Tong-ch'un	Pak Ch'ang-hwan	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
109	<i>Kohyang ŭi charang</i> [The pride of hometown]	1964	Kim Suk-man	Kim Yŏng	Chu Yŏng-saeng
110	<i>Chŏkhu esŏ</i> [In the enemy rear lines]	1964	Ra Chung-hong Chŏn Tong-min	Chŏn Tong-min	Ryŏm Pok-yŏng

Appendix: Film Index (1949-1966) (continued)

No.	Title	Year	Screenplay	Director	Cinematography
111	<i>Kkūt ōpsōra na ūi hūimang</i> [My never-ending hope]	1964	Paek In-jun	O Pyōng-ch'o Kim Sōng-gyo	Kim Ryōn-hak
112	<i>Inmin kyowōn</i> [People's teacher]	1964	Han Sang-un Hō Yong-sam	Ch'ōn Sang-in	Chōng Kyu-wan
113	<i>Taeji ūi adūl (3pu)</i> [Son of the earth (part 3)]	1964	Chu Tong-in	Sin T'ae-uk	Pak Pyōng-su
114	<i>Ryōngbuk ūi saeach'im</i> [New morning of Ryōngbuk]	1964	Ri Pyōng-su	On Sōng-jo Yun Ki-ch'an	Chu Yōng-saeng
115	<i>Ryangbanjōn</i> [Story of yangban]	1964	Chu Tong-in	Ch'ōn Sang-in	Hong Wōn-il
116	<i>Han chōnsa ūi iyagi</i> [Story of one soldier]	1964	Chu Tong-in	Min Chōng-sik	Paek Rin-gi
117	<i>Saedūri naradūnda</i> [Birds are flying]	1964	Kim Ryong-sō	Kim Yōng	Hong Sōng-uk
118	<i>T'aeyang ae ttal</i> [Daughter of the sun]	1964	O Pyōng-ch'o	Pak Ch'ang-hwan	Ri Hūi-sōng
119	<i>Tongno kangban e p'in kkot</i> [The flower on the bank of Tongno river]	1964	Kim Chong-jin	Pak Hak	Hong Wōn-il
120	<i>Sonyōn chungdaewōn</i> [Little squadron soldier]	1964	Kang Hyo-sun	Son Mu-p'yo	Kim Ul-san
121	<i>Rodongja taehanksaeng</i> [The student worker]	1964	Kim Se-ryun	Han Hūi-ch'ōl An Ik-su	Pak Pyōng-su
122	<i>Kūdūl ūn irōk'e ssawōtta (1pu)</i> [This is how they fought (part 1)]	1964	Yang Chae-ch'un Kim Ch'ang-sik	O Pyōng-ch'o	Pak Kyōng-wōn
123	<i>Aech'ak</i> [Attachment]	1964	Ch'oe Ch'ang-hak	Han Sōng-sun	Song Kwang-il
124	<i>Saenghwal ūi norae</i> [Song of life]	1965	Han Sōng	Ch'oe Ik-kyu	Chōng Pong-ch'u
125	<i>Sōngjang ūi kil esō (1pu)</i> [The way of growth (part 1)]	1965	Paek In-jun	Chōn Un-bong	Chōng Kyu-wan
126	<i>Ch'ōngnyōn chōnwi (1pu)</i> [Young avant-garde (part 1)]	1965	Kim Sūng-gu	Chōn Tong-min	Hong Wōn-il
127	<i>Sae sallim</i> [A new life]	1965	Ri Tong-ch'un	Ch'oe Nam-sōn	Kim Ul-san Hong Sōng-uk
128	<i>Chinsim</i> [True heart]	1965	Ri Cha-gyōng	An Ik-su	Chōng Ik-han Paek Rin-gi
130	<i>Kūdūl ūn taeji e sō itta</i> [They stand their ground]	1965	Chang Rye-sun	Han Hūi-ch'ōl An Mun-ha	Song Kwang-il
131	<i>Kūdūl ūn irōk'e ssawōtta (2pu)</i> [This is how they fought (part 2)]	1965	Yang Chae-ch'ung Kim Ch'ang-sik	Ch'oe Ik-kyu	Pak Kyōng-wōn
132	<i>T'ujaeng ūi norae</i> [The battle song]	1965	Ri Puk-myōng	Kim Yōng	Chu Yōng-saeng
133	<i>Ch'ōngnyōn chōnwi (2pu)</i> [Young avant-garde (part 2)]	1965	Kim Sūng-gu	Sin T'ae-uk	Hong Wōn-il
134	<i>P'okp'ung sijōl (1,2pu)</i> [The time of tempest (parts 1,2)]	1965	Pak Ryōng-bo	Ch'ōn Sang-in Chōn Am	Ri Hūi-sōng

Appendix: Film Index (1949-1966) (continued)

No.	Title	Year	Screenplay	Director	Cinematography
135	<i>Sŏngjang ŭi kil esŏ (2pu)</i> [The way of growth (part 2)]	1965	Paek In-jun	O Pyŏng-ch'o Pak Ch'ang-hwan Chŏng Kyu-wan	Chŏng Kyu-wan
136	<i>Chongsori</i> [The bell rings]	1965	Han Myŏng-ch'ŏn	Ri Tŏk-kyu	Chu Yŏng-saeng
137	<i>Na ŭi maedae</i> [My counter]	1965	Kim Se-ryun	An Mun-ha Kim Wŏn-ho	O Ch'i-sŏn Kim Chong-p'il
138	<i>Onjŏngnyŏng</i> [Onjŏng peak]	1965	Ri Chong-sun	O Pyŏng-ch'o Han Sŏng-sun	Pak Pyŏng-su
139	<i>Ch'olli kil</i> [The road of a thousand li]	1965	Ri Tong-il		Song Kwang-il
140	<i>Poji anŭn chŏnsŏn</i> [An invisible front]	1965	Ri Chang-song	Min Chŏng-sik	Hong Wŏn-il
141	<i>Han chidaejang ŭi iyagi (chon, hup'yŏn)</i> [Story of one commander (parts 1,2)]	1965	Ri Chong-sun	Pak Hak	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
142	<i>On kajŏngi ttŏlch'yŏnasŏtta</i> [The family stands up]	1965	Pak Sung-su	Son Mu-p'yo	Chŏng Ik-han
143	<i>Aegukcha Kim Chŏngho</i> [Patriot Kim Chŏng-ho]	1965	Ch'oe Ch'ang-gyŏn	Chŏn Un-bong	Kim Ryŏn-hak
144	<i>Okhwa</i> [Okhwa]	1965	Kim Wŏn-myŏng Pak Ryong-bok	Ko Hak-rim Chŏng Mun-gŭn	Ryŏm Pok-yŏng
145	<i>7ilgan</i> [For 7 days]	1966	Han Sŏng	Ch'oe Nam-sŏn Chu Tong-wŏl	Ri Hŭi-sŏng Hŏ Ŭi-sun
146	<i>Tu sonyŏn</i> [Two boys]	1966	An Si-ryŏl		Chu Yŏng-saeng
147	<i>Ōnŭ han nongjang esŏ</i> [On some farm]	1966	Kim Chae-hun	Ch'oe Ik-kyu	Chŏng Pong-ch'u
148	<i>Ch'ŏlgil uesŏ</i> [On railway tracks]	1966	Min Pyŏng-sŏn Kim Su-hyŏn Kim Chong-hyŏk	Kim Sŏng-gyo	Chŏng Ik-han
149	<i>Myŏngnyanghan mudae</i> [Merry Ring]	1966	Kim Se-ryun	Kim Yŏng	Ryŏm Pok-yŏng
150	<i>Ch'ŏt kŏrŭm</i> [First steps]	1966	Chŏng Han-mu	Han Sŏng-sun	Pak Kyŏng-wŏn
151	<i>T'ongsinwŏn</i> [Soldier of signal battalion]	1966	Ri Ŭng-jin	Ko Hak-rim	O Ch'i-sŏn
152	<i>Sae pyŏl</i> [New star]	1966	Kim Suk-man Kim Hŭi-bong	Pak Ch'ang-hwang	Kim Ryŏn-hak
153	<i>60 ch'ŏngch'un</i> [Young at 60]	1966	Han Myŏng-ch'ŏn	Chŏn Am	Ri Hŭi-sŏng
154	<i>Chŏnhu ŭi ch'ŏngyŏndŭl</i> [Youth on the enemy's rear guard]	1966	Kim Sŭng-gu	Sin T'ae-uk	Song Kwang-il

Appendix: Film Index (1949-1966) (continued)

No.	Title	Year	Screenplay	Director	Cinematography
155	<i>Kohyang kil</i> [The road to hometown]	1966	Kim Se-ryun	Kim Yŏng	Chŏng Pong-ch'u
156	<i>Tubŏntchae sangbong</i> [The second encounter]	1966	Pak Sung-su	Ch'oe Nam-sŏn	Song Kwang-il
157	<i>Ch'oe Haksin ŭi il'ka</i> [Family of Ch'oe Hak-sin]	1966	Paek In-jun	O Pyŏng-ch'o	Pak Pyŏng-su
158	<i>Haksuri saramdŭl</i> [People of Haksu village]	1966	Han Pok-kyu	Cho-sik	Hŏ Ŭi-sun
159	<i>Yŏngwŏngi i kil esŏ</i> [Forever on this road]	1966	Chŏn Kwan-jin	Ch'oe Ik-kyu	Ryŏm Pok-yŏng
160	<i>Kŭmgangsŏn ch'ŏnyŏ</i> [The maid of the Diamond Mountains]	1966		Chu Yŏng-sŏp Son Mu-p'yo	Chŏng Kyu-wan Chŏng Ik-han

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